Marines' Insight into Why Language Training
Did Not Increase Their Operational Effectiveness

To provide some concrete measures assessing Marine Corps culture and language learning programs, the U.S. Marine Corps Center for Advanced Operational Culture Learning (CAOCL) sent out a survey during February 2010 to 15% of all Marines with email addresses on the Marine Corps Global Address List, excluding general officers. CAOCL received 2406 valid responses from Marines, representing all 42 military occupational specialties, all ranks, and all educational levels.[1] Comparisons of the survey demographics to data on the Marine Corps as a whole indicate that respondents are representative of the Marine Corps with the exception of the lowest ranks.[2]

One of the areas of interest to CAOCL was Marines' perceptions of the impact of language training on their operational effectiveness. Of the 1999 Marines who had ever deployed or been stationed overseas, 1642[3] had deployed within the last four years, and 907 of them received predeployment language familiarization training.

Survey Population	2406
Ever Deployed/Stationed Overseas	1999
Deployed within Last Four Years	1642
Received Language Training	907

Of the 905 Marines who responded to whether their language instruction made them more operationally effective, the majority (70.8% or 641) said it did. Twenty nine point two percent or 264 Marines said it did not. The 264 Marines who did not find that their language training increased their operational effectiveness were compared to the general survey population in terms of basic demographic characteristics (age, gender, rank, and education). There was no statistical difference demographically between these Marines and the overall survey population.

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1 General officers were intentionally excluded from the population.

2 Because Privates (E-1s), Privates First Class (E-2s) and Second Lieutenants (O-1s) do not always have addresses on the Global Address List, these ranks are underrepresented in the data. As young Marines new to the Corps, these ranks are unlikely to have deployed in the past four years.

3 Due to different branches and sequels, total numbers of deployed respondents were not identical for the culture and language questions. One thousand six hundred forty-two respondents indicated that they had deployed within the last four years when answering the question, "Did you receive predeployment language training?" However, 1659 respondents indicated having deployed within the last four years when asked if they had received predeployment cultural training.

More Operationally Effective?
Language Training

No
29%

Yes
71%
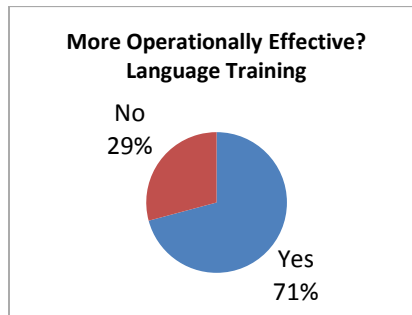
CAOCL then asked this subset of Marines in an open-ended question, "Please tell us why this language instruction did not increase your operational effectiveness." Two hundred thirty-two Marines (88% of the 264 negative responses) took the time to answer this question. Three major themes emerged: the lack of need for language skills, problems with instruction, and retention concerns.

Method

CAOCL reviewed Marines' responses, identified themes present in the data, and assigned codes to them, using the inductive method of coding qualitative answers and the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences Text Analysis for Surveys 3.0 software. Because responses were open-ended, each response could express several themes and therefore require more than one code. The numbers below indicate the frequency that the themes emerged in the data. When all the code frequencies are added together, they surpass the total population of responses. Each code needs to be considered separately.

Key Themes

1. Did Not Need Language Skills

The most prevalent theme identified was the lack of need for language skills to be operationally effective. One hundred five respondents (45.3%) identified this as a problem. CAOCL created a cluster of five codes that comprised the "No Need Cluster" category: No Contact with Locals, Not My Job, Use Interpreter, Spoke English, and No Need (See Appendix A). Within this cluster, the most frequent reason provided was that these Marines did not have contact with the locals (40 responses), as captured by Respondent #1363, "Never interacted with locals." In addition there were those who indicated that their job did not require language skills (29 responses). For example, Respondent #1188 stated, "I am not speaking a foreign language inside of a tank."; Respondent #1499 explained, "CLB, worked only with service members."; and Respondent #951 provided, "My billet did not require any kind of interaction with local nationals." Many Marines indicated they had access to and relied on interpreters, obviating the need for language skills or in recognition of their lack of sufficient language capability despite their training (24 responses). Respondent #455 indicated, "I never had to speak their language. We always spoke to an interpreter." Respondent #1758 and Respondent #1232 respectively discussed the latter concern, when stating "Not enough. Still required extensive use of interpreters, who were not always readily available. Could conduct basic communication with locals, but nothing detailed." and "We had interpreters for speaking with the native population. Also the limited amount of familiarization doesn't really help. Knowing where the head is at does not really help with the mission." Furthermore, 16 respondents indicated that they did not need language skills because, as Respondent #1216 mentioned, "Most Iraqis knew or understood English." Rounding out this cluster is the generic category of "No need" to distinguish those responses that expressed no or limited need to use language from those that just stated they did not use it. Thirty-three responses fell into this category with statements such as, "I

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didn't need it." (Respondent #389) and "because I didn't need to speak Arabic to anyone." (Respondent #78).

2. Problems with Instruction

The second major theme that emerged was problems with instruction. One hundred two responses (44%) fell into this category. CAOCL determined it was necessary to analyze this code separately to provide more detail as to the problems Marines were seeing with the training. Within the code "Problem with Training" (102 responses) CAOCL created numerous sub-categories (See Appendix B). Many of the concerns were time related. Many Marines felt that the time dedicated to language learning was not enough ("Instruction too short"-44 responses and "Limited time within PTP cycle"-12 responses), noting that the class was too brief, time dedicated to language learning was not enough, or that there was not enough time within the predeployment training cycle to learn a language. Respondent #1020 noted, "It was too short of a class to really learn anything." Respondent #1323 stated, "It was not the language, but the amount of time spent trying to learn the language. We do not have the time to actually learn any of it." Complementary to these concerns was the recognition that Marines did not get enough training ("Not enough training"–19 responses), as evidenced in the simple response from Respondent #643, "not enough training."

Respondents also identified that the language instruction was too basic or superficial to be useful in theater ("Too basic, superficial, generic"-31 responses), saying "Provided basic 'hello, how are you' language skills. No way to get a level of proficiency that would increase operational effectiveness at my billet given all the competing demands. The juice would not be worth the squeeze." (Respondent #1966) and "The instruction was the basic language and commands. It was not enough to carry a full conversation with the local population." (Respondent #1824).

Other problems identified included that the training had the wrong emphasis ("Focus off target"-19 responses), with some Marines wanting to learn military phrases or mission-related terms versus basic greetings, others wanting to learn to communicate instead of learning phrases, and still others indicating they were taught the wrong dialect or the wrong language for their operating environment. Some Marines noted that the delivery method employed did not work for them ("Bad delivery method"-15 responses). Others wanted more practical application incorporated into lessons, as Respondent #745 indicated by saying "not enough prac ap time or enough training." PowerPoint and phrase cards were not favored delivery methods. Respondent #1049 captured many of the delivery concerns in his comment, "The classes were all rushed. The facilities used to conduct the training were inadequate. The class sizes were over 50 students per instructor. The instructors were hard to understand and a majority of the classes were PowerPoint."

3. Retention

Lastly, retention issues emerged as a significant theme. Thirty respondents identified the inability to retain the information gained in the training as a reason the training did not increase their operational effectiveness. Respondent #1600 bluntly stated, "I forgot it." Many of those who mentioned retention concerns linked retention issues to problems with instruction. For example, Respondent #1530 explained, "Absolutely worthless training. Our training consisted of rote memorization of canned phrases like 'Lie down and put your hands on your head,' instead of teaching the language itself. Retention approached 0% for most people, even those who earnestly wanted to learn." And time factors were linked to retention concerns, as in Respondent #1743's response, "it was a waste of time. They tried to teach us Iraqi in . . . three weeks. We passed the test and the team forgot 99% of it."

Conclusions

The majority of Marines who indicated they had received predeployment language familiarization training found that the training increased their operational effectiveness. For those who did not, lack of need for language skills, problems with instruction, and retention issues were the most significant causes. What does this reveal? In a deeper analysis of the quotations, especially those associated with the codes "problem with training" and "retention", there seems to be an underlying understanding among Marines of the significant amount of time it takes to gain and retain proficiency in a foreign language and a recognition that that time is not available during a predeployment work-up. Without the necessary time investment, the training is deemed ineffective, leaving some Marines with the conclusion that "so little was learned that it was basically a waste of time." (Respondent #883). It is interesting to note that the difference between the number of hours dedicated to predeployment language learning for those Marines indicating their language training increased their operational effectiveness (26.33 hours) and for those who did not (10.65 hours) was statistically significant (p<.000, see Appendix C), which reinforces this point.

The lack of need for language skills raises the question of who needs the training[4]. The issues raised by these Marines (97 responses) – no job requirement, no interaction with locals, access to interpreters, or no need for such skills – suggest a need to more carefully select those Marines who attend language training in order to maximize training time and effectiveness. Targeting training to specific military occupational specialties (MOSs) may not provide the needed fidelity, as evidenced by Marines from the same MOSs reporting divergent views on whether the training increased their operational effectiveness (See Appendix D). This may be attributed to the fact that Marines in theater are not necessarily employed in their primary MOSs. There are, however, some billets and jobs in theater that do not involve communicating with the local population, and investing language training time in Marines who report "I never left the FOB" (Respondent #307) and "I am a Huey/Cobra mechanic. We do not travel outside of the wire. No contact with the Afghan people has occurred." (Respondent #280) may not be the best use of their time or the training resources. While it may prove challenging to align language training selection with intended operational billet, there may be some value in a more intentional selection process, although it is important to remember this concern is only for a small subset (10.7%) of those Marines who received language training and may not warrant expending limited resources to address.

These Marines' experiences with language training identify key areas that require more attention. What does it take to learn a language? Is the Marine Corps willing to invest the needed time and resources? How much proficiency does a Marine need to be operationally effective? Which Marines and how many need language skills? Further qualitative and quantitative studies that address these issues could perhaps help provide data to guide policy makers as they continue to refine the Marine Corps language learning policies and practices.

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[4] The only code within the cluster that this may not apply to is the "Spoke English" code, as there is no way to predict this in advance of deployment to countries where English is not the primary language. When removed from the cluster, there are 97 responses remaining in the "No Need Cluster."

Appendix A: Analysis of the reasons provided that language training did not increase operational effectiveness

Population: 232
File: LangCult Questions Analysis.tas
Data Source File: CAOCLSurvey_Recode Scale Oct 26.sav
Method: Forced Pull, Inductive Coding
Open-Ended Question in Survey: *Please tell us why this language instruction did not increase your operational effectiveness*.

Rules:
1) Category "Not worth time" means the specific training was not worth the time.
2) Category "No Need" included responses that said "didn't have to use it" or "limited opportunity to use", statements that imply "no need" versus just "no use".
3) If a situation caused no use, then apply the category "No need".
4) Category "Not my job" includes responses that address "inside the wire," "inside the FOB," "never left the FOB" and the like.
5) To use category "Not My Job" with category "no contact with locals", there must be a specific mention of work, e.g. MOS, billet, operation, deployment, etc.
6) Sustainment is not the same thing as retention. Responses that addressed sustainment were coded with "Problem with Training".
7) Note the LangCult Questions Analysis.tas file contains two responses not included in this analysis: one in Problems with Training (#2428) and one in No Use (#2483). There are nine cases in the qualitative data that were removed from the final population (2406) and the data source file because they were considered incomplete; however, they do contain some qualitative data. Their responses have been coded; however, they have not been used here in this analysis to keep the populations (quantitative and qualitative) equal. In independent analysis, the nine cases would be reinserted.

Total Responses	232
Categories are:	
No Need Cluster*	105
No Contact with Locals	40
No Need	33
Not My Job	29
Use Interpreter	24
Spoke English	16
No Use	18
Not worth time	7
No Value	3
Good Training - but did not increase operational effectiveness	6
Problem with Training	102
Retention	30
Computer based training	6
Check in the box	1
Learn from Locals/Interpreters	5
Language vs Culture	1
Other learning methods	1
Not related	1
Not enough information	8

* No Need Cluster is a combination of the following categories: No Need, No Contact with Locals, Not My Job, Use Interpreter, and Spoke English.

Graphic representation of the population responding to the question, "Do you find yourself more operationally effective because of this language instruction?"

More Operationally Effective?
Language Training

No
29%

Yes
71%

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Reasons Language Training Did Not Increase Operational Effectiveness

■ Reasons Language Training Did Not Increase Operational Effectiveness

Category	Value
Problem with training	102
No contact with locals	40
No need	33
Retention	30
Not my job	29
Use Interpreter	24
No use	18
Spoke English	16
Not enough information	8
Not worth time	7
Good training but . . .	6
Computer based training	6
Learn from locals/interpreters	5
No value	3
Other learning methods	1
Check in the box	1
LangVsCult	1
Not related	1

Appendix B: Analysis of the Language Training Category: Problems with Instruction

Population: 102
File: LQ Problem with Instruction 2406 Final.tas
Category Source File: LangCult Questions Analysis.tas; category transferred to LQ Problems with Instruction May 2011 Excel.xlsx
Data Source File: CAOCLSurvey_Recode Scale Oct 26.sav
Method: Forced Pull, Inductive Coding

The following is an analysis of the category "Problem with Training" from Language Question in LangCult Questions Analysis.tas. Note that this does not include the categories "Not worth the time" or "Retention." These results should be considered in conjunction with those results.

Rules:
1) The category "not enough training" includes responses that stated they did not receive enough information.
2) The category "instruction too short" includes both those that discussed the class time as well as those that discussed there was not enough time to learn a language, but not tied to the predeployment schedule.
3) The category "focus off target" includes responses that addressed emphasis of training on vocabulary instead of grammar (and vice versa) or phrases not the language and those that mentioned that the wrong language, dialect, etc. was taught.
4) The category "bad delivery method" includes those responses that addressed lack of "prac ap" or practical application.

Total Population	232
Total Responses:	102
Categories are:	
Instruction too short	44
Too basic, superficial, generic	31
Focus off target	19
Limited time within PTP cycle	12
Not enough training	19
No sustainment	3
Bad delivery method	15
Bad instructor	5
Positive feedback embedded	4
Wrong student body	2
Misaligned schedule	1
Not enough information to determine problem	1

**Problem Identified
with Language Training**

■ Problem Identified

Bar chart values:
- Instruction too short: 44
- Too basic, superficial, Generic: 31
- Focus off target: 19
- Not enough training: 19
- Bad delivery method: 15
- Limited time within PTP cycle: 12
- Bad instructor: 5
- Positive feedback embedded: 4
- No sustainment: 3
- Wrong student body: 2
- Misaligned schedule: 1
- Not enough information to ID problem: 1
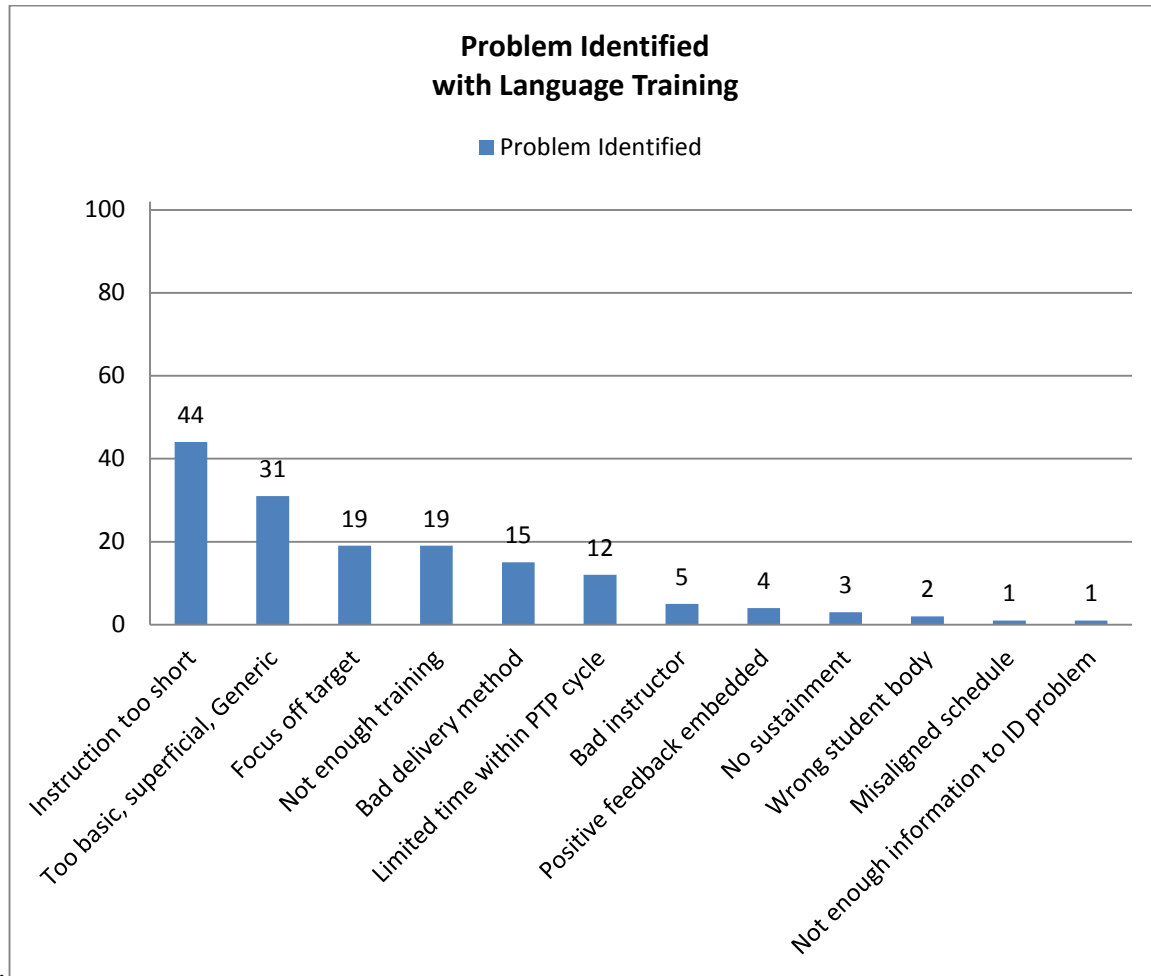
Appendix C – Independent Samples T-Test on Hours of Predeployment Language Learning

Group Statistics				N	Mean
	15B2. Do you find yourself more operationally effective because of this language instruction?			N	Mean
15C. PTP Hours for Language Training [how many hours did you dedicate to language learning in preparation for deployment?	Dimension 1	Yes		637	26.33
		No		259	10.65

Independent Samples Test

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
									95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	Lower	Upper
15C. PTP Hours for Language Training [how many hours did you dedicate to language learning in preparation for deployment?	Equal variances assumed	54.302	.000	6.287	894	.000	15.677	2.494	10.783	20.571
	Equal variances not assumed			8.074	847.259	.000	15.677	1.942	11.866	19.488

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Appendix D – Primary Military Occupational Field Charts

Chart 1: PMOS of those who answered: Yes, the language training increased my operational effectiveness.

Primary Occupational Field – Yes Respondents

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	O1 Personnel & Admin	30	4.7	4.7	4.7
	O2 Intelligence	26	4.1	4.1	8.7
	O3 Infantry	107	16.7	16.7	25.4
	O4 Logistics	45	7.0	7.0	32.4
	O5 MAGTF Plans	1	.2	.2	32.6
	O6 Communications	58	9.0	9.0	41.7
	O8 Field Artillery	28	4.4	4.4	46.0
	O9 Training	1	.2	.2	46.2
	11 Utilities	5	.8	.8	47.0
	13 Engineer	39	6.1	6.1	53.0
	18 Tank & AAV	7	1.1	1.1	54.1
	21 Ordnance	16	2.5	2.5	56.6
	23 Ammunition & EOD	8	1.2	1.2	57.9
	26 SIGINT	10	1.6	1.6	59.4
	28 Grd. Electronics Maint	24	3.7	3.7	63.2
	30 Supply Admin & Ops	40	6.2	6.2	69.4
	31 Traffic Mgt	3	.5	.5	69.9
	33 Food Service	9	1.4	1.4	71.3
	34 Financial Mgt	3	.5	.5	71.8
	35 Motor Transport	44	6.9	6.9	78.6
	41 Marine Corps Community Services	2	.3	.3	78.9
	43 Public Affairs	1	.2	.2	79.1
	44 Legal Services	7	1.1	1.1	80.2
	46 Visual Information/Combat Camera	1	.2	.2	80.3
	48 Recruiting	3	.5	.5	80.8
	55 Music	2	.3	.3	81.1
	57 NBC	5	.8	.8	81.9
	58 MP & Corrections	19	3.0	3.0	84.9
	59 Electronics Maint	1	.2	.2	85.0
	60 Aircraft Maint	16	2.5	2.5	87.5

61 Aircraft Maint Helo/Tiltrotor	8	1.2	1.2	88.8
62 Aircraft Maint Fixed Wing	10	1.6	1.6	90.3
63 Avionics (OMA)	3	.5	.5	90.8
64 Avionics (IMA)	5	.8	.8	91.6
65 Aviation Ordnance	3	.5	.5	92.0
66 Aviation Logistics	5	.8	.8	92.8
68 METOC Services	1	.2	.2	93.0
70 Airfield Services	9	1.4	1.4	94.4
72 Air C2	9	1.4	1.4	95.8
73 Enlisted Flight Crew	1	.2	.2	95.9
75 Pilot/NFOs	7	1.1	1.1	97.0
80 Miscellaneous Requirements	19	3.0	3.0	100.0
Total	641	100.0	100.0	

Chart 2: PMOS of those who answered: No, the language training did not increase my operational effectiveness.

Primary Occupational Field – No Respondents

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	O1 Personnel & Admin	12	4.5	4.6	4.6
	O2 Intelligence	11	4.2	4.2	8.7
	O3 Infantry	20	7.6	7.6	16.3
	O4 Logistics	20	7.6	7.6	24.0
	O5 MAGTF Plans	1	.4	.4	24.3
	O6 Communications	23	8.7	8.7	33.1
	O8 Field Artillery	9	3.4	3.4	36.5
	O9 Training	1	.4	.4	36.9
	11 Utilities	2	.8	.8	37.6
	13 Engineer	19	7.2	7.2	44.9
	18 Tank & AAV	5	1.9	1.9	46.8
	21 Ordnance	8	3.0	3.0	49.8
	23 Ammunition & EOD	6	2.3	2.3	52.1
	26 SIGINT	2	.8	.8	52.9
	28 Grd. Electronics Maint	15	5.7	5.7	58.6
	30 Supply Admin & Ops	10	3.8	3.8	62.4
	31 Traffic Mgt	1	.4	.4	62.7
	33 Food Service	2	.8	.8	63.5
	34 Financial Mgt	4	1.5	1.5	65.0
	35 Motor Transport	19	7.2	7.2	72.2
	43 Public Affairs	1	.4	.4	72.6
	46 Visual Information/Combat Camera	1	.4	.4	73.0
	48 Recruiting	2	.8	.8	73.8
	55 Music	1	.4	.4	74.1
	57 NBC	1	.4	.4	74.5
	58 MP & Corrections	3	1.1	1.1	75.7
	59 Electronics Maint	2	.8	.8	76.4
	60 Aircraft Maint	7	2.7	2.7	79.1
	61 Aircraft Maint Helo/Tiltrotor	6	2.3	2.3	81.4
	62 Aircraft Maint Fixed Wing	6	2.3	2.3	83.7
	63 Avionics (OMA)	5	1.9	1.9	85.6
	64 Avionics (IMA)	2	.8	.8	86.3

	65 Aviation Ordnance	4	1.5	1.5	87.8
	66 Aviation Logistics	2	.8	.8	88.6
	70 Airfield Services	5	1.9	1.9	90.5
	72 Air C2	3	1.1	1.1	91.6
	75 Pilot/NFOs	16	6.1	6.1	97.7
	80 Miscellaneous Requirements	6	2.3	2.3	100.0
	Total	263	99.6	100.0	
Missing	Missing Data	1	.4		
Total		264	100.0		

Chart 3: PMOS of those who stated that language training did not increase their operational effectiveness because they did not need it. (NOTE: excludes those who indicated their counterparts spoke English.)

Primary Occupational Field – No Need Minus Spoke English Respondents

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	O1 Personnel & Admin	1	1.0	1.0	1.0
	O2 Intelligence	2	2.1	2.1	3.1
	O3 Infantry	3	3.1	3.1	6.2
	O4 Logistics	11	11.3	11.3	17.5
	O6 Communications	9	9.3	9.3	26.8
	O8 Field Artillery	2	2.1	2.1	28.9
	11 Utilities	2	2.1	2.1	30.9
	13 Engineer	8	8.2	8.2	39.2
	18 Tank & AAV	3	3.1	3.1	42.3
	21 Ordnance	2	2.1	2.1	44.3
	23 Ammunition & EOD	2	2.1	2.1	46.4
	26 SIGINT	1	1.0	1.0	47.4
	28 Grd. Electronics Maint	8	8.2	8.2	55.7
	30 Supply Admin & Ops	5	5.2	5.2	60.8
	31 Traffic Mgt	1	1.0	1.0	61.9
	33 Food Service	2	2.1	2.1	63.9
	34 Financial Mgt	2	2.1	2.1	66.0
	35 Motor Transport	9	9.3	9.3	75.3
	48 Recruiting	1	1.0	1.0	76.3
	58 MP & Corrections	1	1.0	1.0	77.3
	59 Electronics Maint	1	1.0	1.0	78.4
	60 Aircraft Maint	2	2.1	2.1	80.4
	61 Aircraft Maint Helo/Tiltrotor	2	2.1	2.1	82.5
	62 Aircraft Maint Fixed Wing	2	2.1	2.1	84.5
	63 Avionics (OMA)	2	2.1	2.1	86.6
	65 Aviation Ordnance	2	2.1	2.1	88.7
	70 Airfield Services	3	3.1	3.1	91.8
	75 Pilot/NFOs	6	6.2	6.2	97.9
	80 Miscellaneous Requirements	2	2.1	2.1	100.0
	Total	97	100.0	100.0	