



U.S. Marine Corps Center for Advanced Operational Culture Learning¹

Culture and Language Survey: Ground Combat Arms Responses

Summary

In a CAOCL survey of 2406 Marines conducted in February 2010, ground combat arms respondents reported that they interacted more frequently with the local population than those in combat support while in theater. While both ground combat arms (GCA) and combat support (CS) respondents valued culture and language, GCA respondents used cultural and language capabilities more often in theater and placed higher value on these capabilities. Both officer and enlisted GCA respondents reported equally the frequency of interactions with the local population as well as the need for cultural capabilities. In sum, the survey data indicate that cultural and language capabilities are essential components of mission success for both officer and enlisted ground combat arms Marines.

Sample and Method

In order to better understand the perspectives of Marine Corps ground combat arms forces about cultural and language capabilities, a subset of 349 Marines with GCA-related, two-digit military occupational specialties (MOSs 03, 08, 13, 18) was selected from the CAOCL Culture and Language Survey. These GCA respondents were compared to the remaining Marine Corps population in the survey (2056 other respondents²). 94% of GCA respondents had been deployed in the past four years, in contrast to 81% of CS respondents (high statistical significance, $p < .000$). GCA respondents were significantly more likely to receive predeployment culture training (92%) than other deploying respondents (82%; $p < .000$). GCA respondents also received predeployment language training (79%) at a statistically significant higher rate than CS respondents (50%; $p < .000$).³

Ground combat arms respondents' attitudes to and use of cultural capabilities and language skills

In their previous deployments, GCA respondents reported spending almost double the percentage of time with locals (47%) in comparison to CS respondents (29%; $p < .000$).⁴ This increased interaction with foreign populations probably accounts for GCA respondents' higher valuation of cultural capabilities and language skills. GCA respondents ranked the importance of using language skills ($p < .000$)⁵ and understanding the local culture ($p < .000$)⁶ more highly than CS respondents. Not surprisingly, those GCA respondents who had deployed to a Named Operation in the last four years reported using language skills ($p < .000$)⁷ and cultural capabilities ($p < .000$)⁸ more often to accomplish the goals of their mission on

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² Total survey population is 2406 respondents. The N for MOS is 2405 due to lack of response from one Marine participant.

³ Pearson chi square for all three tests. N=2405 for deployment; N=1658 for culture training; N=1641 for language training.

⁴ Paired sample t-test: N=1997.

⁵ Paired sample t-test: GCA mean 3.31 versus CS mean 3.05 (1=not important; 4=very important) N=2405.

⁶ Paired sample t-test: GCA mean 3.41 versus CS mean 3.22 (1=not important; 4=very important) N=2384.

⁷ Paired sample t-test: GCA mean 2.65 versus CS mean 1.88 (1=never; 4=always) N=1555.

⁸ Paired sample t-test: GCA mean 3.11 versus CS mean 2.23 (1=never; 4=always) N=1555.

their most recent deployment than CS respondents. One of the more important findings was that *both GCA and CS respondents ranked cultural and language training as **equally important** to all other predeployment training (PTP) requirements.* There were no statistical differences between GCA respondents and CS respondents when comparing cultural ($p < .663$) and language ($p < .183$) training to other PTP requirements.⁹

Ground combat arms respondents: officers and enlisted personnel compared

When comparing officer and enlisted GCA respondents, several interesting differences emerged. Both officers and enlisted personnel spent almost the same percentage of time interacting with locals.¹⁰ However, while officers reported using cultural capabilities as often as enlisted personnel,¹¹ officers stated they used language skills *more* frequently than enlisted respondents ($p < .001$).¹² As one would expect, both officer and enlisted GCA respondents ranked cultural capabilities as equally important.¹³ However, in an unexpected reversal, enlisted respondents ranked the importance of using language skills more highly than did the officers ($p < .000$).¹⁴ One possible explanation for this is that enlisted personnel have less access to interpreters and so may need language skills more.

Qualitative answers

While statistics provide concrete numbers, they do not always tell the story behind the numbers. The CAOCL Culture and Language Survey also contained several open-ended questions. The final question offered Marines the opportunity to provide recommendations on how to improve Marine Corps' cultural and language learning programs. In their responses¹⁵, many Marines explained, in their own words, how they view cultural and language capabilities. GCA respondents offered 126 comments, which were analyzed using textual analysis methods. Of these responses, 93 respondents or 73.8% stated they value cultural and/or language capabilities or training either directly or indirectly through inference or via positive recommendation. Only three respondents (2.4%) expressed that this learning was negative or of no value. Below is a sample of comments from GCA respondents from different ages, ranks, and MOSs:

I let my M16A4 do my talking. More combat training and less touchy feely crap. A basic cultural brief indicating do's and do not's with basic language sets is about as much time as I am willing to waste.

■ #1212, a 37 year old, male E-7 (PMOS 0369) with deployment experience

Communication and knowledge [are] key to the success of any campaign. Knowing your surroundings and getting the populace to work with you instead of against you seems to be the most effective way to win the wars of today and tomorrow.

■ #981, a 32 year old, male E-6 (PMOS 0369) with deployment experience

⁹ Paired sample t-test for culture training: GCA mean 1.98 versus CS mean 1.97 (1=not important, 2=equally important, 3=more important) N=2384; T-test for language training: GCA mean 1.85 versus CS mean 1.80 (1=not important, 2=equally important, 3=more important) N=2405.

¹⁰ Paired sample t-test: Officer GCA mean 49% versus Enlisted GCA mean 47% (no statistical significance, $p < .512$) N=328.

¹¹ Paired sample t-test: Officer GCA mean 3.24, Enlisted GCA mean 3.04 (1=never; 4=always) (no statistical significance, $p < .07$) N=297.

¹² Paired sample t-test: Officer GCA mean 2.9 versus Enlisted GCA mean 2.5 (1=never; 4=always) N=297.

¹³ Paired sample t-test: Officer GCA mean 3.43 versus Enlisted GCA mean 3.39 (1=not important; 4=very important) (no statistical significance, $p < .591$) N=348.

¹⁴ Paired sample t-test: Officer mean 3.12 versus Enlisted GCA mean 3.44 (1=not important; 4=very important) N=349.

¹⁵ Final Question total population, N=545. GCA respondents, N=126. Note: When compared with those Marines who did not offer comments, this group of Marines is older with more service and deployment experience, uses cultural and language capabilities more, and places higher value on these capabilities.

Understanding the culture is what makes us money on the ground. It goes without saying that people fear the Marine Corps or worse hate the Marines for being in their country. Our ability to have the smallest possible impact on daily life and their culture helps them to open up and trust us. When they trust us the biggest battle of all has been won. When they call us friend is when long term change has taken place and we have made a measurable difference in their way of life. None of this is possible without cultural training. I by no means think people have to like us but in a war on an insurgency where there are no clear lines drawn and the good guys and bad guys trade places in the communities, not insulting or belittling the culture helps us develop rapport with the guys on the fence and keep them from becoming bad guys.

■ #513, a 26 year old, male E-5 (PMOS 0331) with deployment experience

Cultural training and foreign language training has helped immensely during my combat tours. The training is good, but I believe we need more of both. Can we get the mission accomplished without this training? Yes we can. However, it is so much easier to accomplish the mission and exceed the parameters of "mission success" with this training.

■ #483, a 24 year old, male E-5 (PMOS 1371) with deployment experience

I am currently in SAW. Cultural training is vital to understanding the conflicts we are in or may enter in the future. Researching the history and dynamics of a culture are a must for the planning process IOT develop a plan that accounts for situations that exist or may arise during the conduct of operations. The most difficult task for our Marines is to train them in all the requisite combat skills to survive in combat, the most important skill set, while also devoting time to cultural training -- while still being world wide deployable and not regionally.

■ #1841, a 40 year old, male O-4 (PMOS 0302) with deployment experience

The Marine Corps is an expeditionary service. We interact with foreigners in every aspect of accomplishing our missions: fighting with them, fighting against them, training them, trying to keep them safe, and trying to gain their support. If the only way we can interact with them is through a translator and we are not able to understand what's important to them we are making our job exponentially more difficult.

■ #1608, a 28 year old, male O-3 (PMOS 0802) with deployment experience

Language skills and understanding cultures are each crucial educational avenues in which to enhance creation of the Strategic Corporal. Actions of Marines at every level can have strategic level effect when cultural misunderstandings result in negative assessment of US government operations. Regionalization of cultural training to each specific combatant command would be beneficial. Whether a Marine is deploying to or moving to another country, cultural and language education should translate into a Mission Essential Task regarding interaction with Host Nation partners.

■ #1835, a 40 year old, female O-4 (PMOS 1302) with deployment experience

Operational culture training needs to be comprehensive, immersive, and complementary to the tactics, techniques, and procedures of operational Marine units. "Fairy dusting" cultural training with laminated cards and outdated, mail-around powerpoint briefs only solidifies a notion that many Marines already have - that cultural awareness is a nice thing, but maybe not so important as tactical or skill-based training. I would argue that it is, however, equally important - on the modern battlefield, ignorance can endanger a Marine just as much as steel.

■ #1616, a 35 year old, male O-3 (PMOS 1302) currently deployed