



# Language Lessons Learned? NATO Requirements and Norwegian Officer Cadets

## RESEARCH ARTICLE

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## ABSTRACT

This study establishes the extent to which Norwegian officer cadets have reached NATO English-language capability targets (NCT) on their graduation with a bachelor's degree in Military Studies. It further investigates their opinions about the role of English language in the context of the officer profession. Cadets ( $n = 104$ ) from the three military academies (Army, Navy, Air Force) filled in a Likert-scale questionnaire and afterwards tested on their language in accordance with NATO Standardization Agreement 6001. Analyses of test results showed that while very few cadets reached the NCT for officers working on international staffs; a larger number, however, reached the NCT for officer deployments to NATO operations, exercises, or training. While questionnaire respondents considered the English language instruction offered during their studies relevant to the military profession, the absence of a summative assessment of language proficiency would appear to influence motivation for language training efforts. We conclude that, in order to reach NCT, military educational institutions would do well to increase their focus on the NATO language standard and consider their future assessment practices.

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When the Norwegian Armed Forces launched an extensive military education reform tailored to limited budgets (2018), a consequence of the reform was that English language no longer would be taught as a subject in its own right: language instruction at the military academies would now form part of integrated modules focusing on subjects such as leadership, tactics, or joint operations. Moreover, there would be no summative assessment – a final language exam – to ensure or confirm that future officers at a professional military education in a NATO member nation achieved the required level of English proficiency. Notwithstanding the increasing attention accorded to English language on the part of NATO, communicated to member nations through the Bureau of International Language Coordination (BILC), NATO's advisory body for questions concerning language training and testing, there has been no investigation of potential consequences for language proficiency.

The present study therefore set out to determine the extent to which Norwegian officer cadets at the three military academies (Army, Navy, Air Force) meet NATO Capability Targets (NCT) for English language when they graduate with a bachelor's degree in Military Studies. Doing this, it employed an assessment tool designed for this exact purpose: a test developed in accordance with NATO Standardization Agreement (STANAG) 6001. The Nordic countries share similar civilian and military education systems, and test officers according to the NATO language proficiency standard. Moreover, there is widespread collaboration between language professionals through the Nordic Defence Cooperation (NORDEFCO). The findings of our study should thus be of interest to Nordic military educational institutions and to all officers who consider applying for a NATO position abroad.

The language proficiency level descriptors of STANAG 6001, known as ATrainP-5,<sup>1</sup> were originally developed based on the Interagency Language Roundtable (ILR) level descriptors which continue to be used to test the language proficiency of American public-sector employees.<sup>2</sup> It may seem illogical to test the linguistic competence of military personnel using a general language proficiency (GLP) scale, which is what the level descriptors in ATrainP-5 present, not least when considering the recognised need for eliciting authentic target language use (TLU) in tests (see, for instance, Bachmann & Palmer, 1996; Messick, 1996; Lewkowicz, 2000; Fulcher & Davidson, 2007; Knoch & Macqueen, 2020). However, developing different tests for all services and their respective branches would have constituted an insurmountable task, and NATO accordingly set NCT for member nations' officers and non-commissioned officers (NCOs) based on the ATrainP-5 level descriptors. The focus and purpose of testing in accordance with the NATO standard is to establish what candidates successfully *can do* in their foreign language. A recent study nevertheless pointed to the disconnect between what military test takers use language to achieve in the work context, on the one hand, and having that ability assessed by use of a general language proficiency test on the other (Grande et al., 2022).

When reviewing the literature, it turns out that published military-language testing studies remain few and far between. Green and Wall's (2005) seminal study of language-testing practices in NATO member and partner countries found that nations approached test development in different ways, struggling to balance testing general language proficiency with testing military TLU. Moreover, this study suggested that politics would sometimes unduly impact on nations' testing and rating practices. Their findings helped inform BILC in their efforts to achieve standardisation throughout the alliance. Smaller studies on military language testing have nevertheless been conducted, within the NATO alliance or with contributions from linguists in BILC member nations.

Djuric (2008) investigated the role of washback (the influence of testing on pedagogical methods, curriculum design, and the receptivity and habits of students) between military language training and language testing in accordance with STANAG 6001 in Slovenia; she claimed it would benefit both military language students and STANAG test-takers if teaching and testing practices could be better aligned. Taking a broader, multinational approach, Monaghan (2012) emphasised the importance of English language proficiency in terms of achieving good, allied interoperability, a topic more fully explored by Joyce and Thomson

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1 See <https://www.natobilc.org/files/ATrainP-5%20EDA%20V2%20E.pdf>.

2 See <https://www.govtilr.org/index.htm>.

(2015), who argued the importance of language needs analyses for both defence and policing purposes. An abundance of anecdotal evidence suggests, however, that most Nordic citizens believe their English-language skills to be superior to those observed in many other European countries, hence there is really no need for developing further proficiency. Indeed, Farr (2016) found that even highly motivated Swedish staff college students had little interest in prioritising time and effort on the study of English. The fact nonetheless remains that officers from the Scandinavian countries generally tend to be considered highly proficient users of English.

Several factors may have contributed to this development. Gerhards (2014) has identified how the size of a nation will influence its need for being able to communicate successfully with other countries. With a population of 5.4 million people (2021), Norway is the smallest Scandinavian country, followed by Denmark (5.8 million). Historically speaking, these countries may have early recognised the necessity of talking to people outside their own geographical area. In the Nordic countries, English language classes form part of daily life from the time children start school, a practice which has been identified as substantially contributing to mastering a foreign language (Jaekel et al., 2022). Similarly, early exposure to English language media products has been found to enhance learners' linguistic skills (Mitterer & McQueen, 2009). In present-day society, having international colleagues with whom one communicates using English as a lingua franca is entirely common. From the perspective of building communicative competence (Canale & Swain, 1980), all these trends are positive. However, and as a direct result, language tuition in higher education, even at military defence universities, might come under pressure, simply because an increasing number of those who speak English as second language are perceived to be fluent.

In the current Norwegian officer education system, the question remains how the Norwegian Armed Forces can feel confident that the present form of tuition sufficiently prepares future officers for working with allies during peacetime, crisis, or war, contributing to allied interoperability. The NATO language capability target for staff officers is STANAG 6001 level 3 ("L3") in each of the four skills together comprising languages proficiency – listening, speaking, reading, and writing. The capability target for officers going on deployments, or to exercises and training, is level 2+ ("L2+") in all four skills. While most Norwegian officers will primarily use English during deployments, exercises, and training during the early years of their career, the NATO expectation is nevertheless that, in the capacity of being officers, their English proficiency should be at or nearing L3. While language testing of officer cadets in accordance with STANAG 6001 is carried out in many NATO member and partner nations, results are rarely reported beyond national borders.

Designing the study, the aim of our contribution was twofold. Firstly, the study set out to determine the extent to which NCT are met when Norwegian officer cadets graduate with a bachelor's degree in Military Studies. Secondly, the respondents answered a questionnaire on the role of English language in the officer profession to explore possible links between attitudes and test results.

The descriptive case study was guided by two research questions (RQs). The first was purely quantitative in nature: "To what extent do Norwegian officer cadets meet NATO Capability Targets for English language when they graduate from the Norwegian Defence University College (NDUC)?" The second had a mixed-methods, or *quan-qual*, approach: "What are the cadets' opinions on the role of English language in the officer profession?"

In order to answer the first research question, graduating cadets from the NDUC military academies had their English language skills tested in accordance with NATO STANAG 6001. The second research question aimed at exploring the views held by the same cadets regarding the need for English proficiency when working as officers in the Norwegian Armed Forces, by use of a questionnaire targeting language aspects related to the NATO standard. The study found that only about half of the test-takers met the NCT for officers (RQ1), even though almost everyone recognised the need for advanced language skills in the officer profession (RQ2).

First, the methods used to answer the research questions are presented: the STANAG 6001 test and the questionnaire. Empirical results are then presented in the following section; after this comes a discussion of the findings and their implications for future practice. This paper argues that in order for more graduating cadets to reach NCT, an increased focus on the NATO language standard and assessment practices should be considered.

## METHODS

In order to determine the extent to which Norwegian officer cadets meet NCT for officers (RQ1), the graduating classes at each of the three military academies were tested in all four skills (listening, speaking, reading, writing), in accordance with STANAG 6001. On the first day of the testing session, before any test results had been shared with them, participants filled in a four-point Likert-scale questionnaire (Appendix B) targeting their opinions on the role of English language in the officer profession. To ensure the comprehensibility of the statements for non-linguists, the questionnaire was in Norwegian and had been developed in consultation with experienced army officers.

## PARTICIPANTS

The test-takers ( $n = 104$ ) and questionnaire respondents were all nearing the completion of their degree in Military Studies. The entire sample had completed primary and secondary education (high school); eight cadets held a bachelor's degree from a civilian education institution. 22 cadets were from the Air Force Academy, 33 from the Naval Academy, and 49 from the Military Academy (Army). 22% of the sample belonged to the age group 21–22 years old, 73% of the sample were 23–26 years old, and 5% were 27 or older. 26% of the respondents were female. All spoke Norwegian as their first language.

## TESTERS

The two language testers responsible for test administration, implementation, and rating were female native speakers of Norwegian, holding MA degrees in English Language from Norwegian universities. Both had more than 12 years' experience in developing, validating, and rating language tests in accordance with STANAG 6001. In 2018–19, they worked with the second NATO English Benchmark Advisory Test (BAT2), one as a proctor, the other as a test developer, tester, and rater. Due to their extensive experience working for the military, it was believed that potential bias associated with interviewing and assessing a predominantly male test-taker population would be no cause for concern.

## TEST INSTRUMENTS

In a STANAG 6001 test, each of the four language skills, listening comprehension, spoken proficiency, reading comprehension, and writing skills are tested separately. Listening and reading comprehension are commonly referred to as receptive skills, while spoken proficiency and writing are productive skills. Below, we describe the different parts of the test in some detail. For examples of reading, speaking, and writing tasks, see Appendix A.

## RECEPTIVE SKILLS

Norway develops receptive-skills STANAG tests in collaboration with the testing team at the Royal Danish Defence College to test levels 2, 2 + and 3. The tests used in this study thus form part of the test battery used to test Danish and Norwegian officers alike. For these tests, candidates answered multiple-choice questions (MCQs) based on their comprehension of short listening or reading texts respectively. The 17 listening texts covered a variety of topics, presented in the form of authentic texts involving one or more native speakers with Australian, British, or American accents. Texts were played once with pauses between them so candidates had time to read each of the 24 MCQs and to answer having listened. The total test time was 45 minutes. The reading test similarly presented candidates with 18 different authentic texts, accompanied by one or more MCQs, to a total of 24. The total number of words to be read was 2,800; the time limit was 60 minutes. Instructions on how to respond to MCQ test items were given in Norwegian prior to the test.

To ensure the instrument is reliably testing what it set out to test, language tests must be trialled on a sample with characteristics similar to those of the targeted test-taker audience (Alderson et al., 1995). When validating tests, a sample of no fewer than 30 candidates is recommended (Green, 2013). The listening test was validated by trialling on a test-taker audience of Swedish officer cadets ( $n = 40$ ), while the reading test was trialled on two groups of Norwegian senior NCOs ( $n = 32$ ). In addition to analyses of item difficulty, item discrimination, Cronbach's Alpha,

descriptive statistics, and distractor analysis were carried out to confirm that the content, task, and accuracy of the items were aligned with the targeted STANAG levels. The reliability analyses of pilot-test results indicated that they consistently distinguished between test-takers' proficiency levels (Alpha values between .7 and .8). It should be noted that Cronbach's Alpha values are influenced by factors such as distribution of test scores, test length, and whether the test is norm-referenced or criterion-referenced, like STANAG 6001 (Brown, 2001).

## PRODUCTIVE SKILLS

A different writing prompt was developed for each military academy so no test-taker could prepare for the task. Each bilevel prompt tested the same linguistic functions, and tasks were constructed in a way allowing test-takers to respond without drawing on resources other than their own personal experience (Feak & Dobson, 1996). Test-takers had 60 minutes at their disposal; the suggested length of response was 500 words. Instructions were given in Norwegian, accompanied by written instructions in English. To mirror an authentic TLU situation, test takers were allowed to write on laptops, using all available Microsoft Word text-editing tools.

Similarly, different sets of oral proficiency interview (OPI) prompts were used randomly in each testing session. The interview is designed to resemble an authentic conversation, allowing candidates to show what they "can do" in the target language (Swender, 2003). Since candidates cannot prepare for the discussion, they need to draw on their linguistic resources and communicate spontaneously. Each OPI lasted up to 30 minutes. The initial stage of the test was kept well within the candidate's capacity, since individual oral tests tend to arouse a great deal of anxiety in test takers (Hughes, 2003). When moving from L2 tasks to testing for L3 proficiency, abstract topics were introduced and questions became more complex, still mirroring normal talk-in-interaction (Luoma, 2004).

While some critics have argued that the language sample elicited during OPIs will differ from ordinary conversational speech (Lantolf & Frawley, 1985; Young & Weiyun He, 1998; Chalhoub-Deville & Fulcher, 2003), test interviews will still reliably elicit rateable spoken-language performances (Young & Weiyun He, 1998). To ensure uniformity of elicitation techniques and to minimise differences in interlocutor effect (Kormos, 1999), the same pair of testers conducted and rated every interview. As ratings of interviews have been proved to be affected by various factors such as rater fatigue and drift (Knoch et al., 2021), every possible step was taken to control for unsubstantiated ratings. The rating is conducted immediately after the interview, in a discussion where candidate performance is systematically compared to the level descriptors. As levels were set in a joint assessment, inter-rater reliability was not calculated.

The same two raters individually assessed each writing test. The previous year, the interrater-reliability calculation for this pair of testers showed substantial agreement exceeding chance ( $Kappa = 0.73$ ,  $n = 95$ ), according to Cohen's (1988) interpretation. In a handful of cases, a third opinion was required. These writing tests were assessed by a NATO language-testing expert from the Royal Danish Defence College.

## QUESTIONNAIRE

On the first day of the testing session, before any test results had been shared with them, participating test-taker cadets filled in a four-point Likert-scale questionnaire (Appendix B) targeting their opinions on the role of the English language when working as an officer. The first part of the questionnaire gathered personal information about the sample: age group, years of service in the Armed Forces, and educational background. The main part of the questionnaire consisted of 27 statements, investigating the respondents' opinions on the role of English proficiency for officers. The statements focused on the relative importance of the four skills, knowledge about learning outcomes and the NATO language standard, how the sample perceived superior officers' attitudes to the need for language proficiency, and self-assessment of their English skills. The question items were created by the researchers, and to ensure the comprehensibility of the statements for non-linguists, the questionnaire was in Norwegian and was developed in consultation with experienced army officers. While not all responses will be discussed in this article, they are reported on in Appendix B.

## DATA COLLECTION

The study complied with standards of research involving human participants. All cadets gave written consent to anonymous sharing of test results and questionnaire answers. Permission to carry out the study was obtained from the Norwegian Centre for Research Data (NSD), from the NDUC research approval board, and from the commandants at the military academies. The data were collected directly from the respondents. As interviews constitute the most time-consuming part of the test, only 63 cadets were tested in speaking, and their participation was voluntary. Accordingly, there is more data on the listening, reading, and writing tests than on the speaking test. 104 cadets sat for the listening test, and 103 cadets completed the reading and writing tests. When responding to the questionnaire, some cadets left certain questions open; the number of responses per statement thus varies.

## DATA ANALYSES

The receptive-skills tests were scored according to validated answer keys. Standardized Language Profile (SLP) data – each candidate's results across all four skills – were analysed using IBM SPSS, version 26. To consider RQ1 from different perspectives, results for two groups of test-takers were analysed:

1. Officer cadets tested in all four skills ( $n = 63$ )
2. Officer cadets tested in listening, reading, and writing ( $n = 104$ )

Calculating total scores in SPSS, SLP ratings were converted into numbers, where the highest possible total score (having been rated L3 in all four skills) would equal 48 points.

Questionnaire responses were similarly analysed using SPSS.

## RESULTS

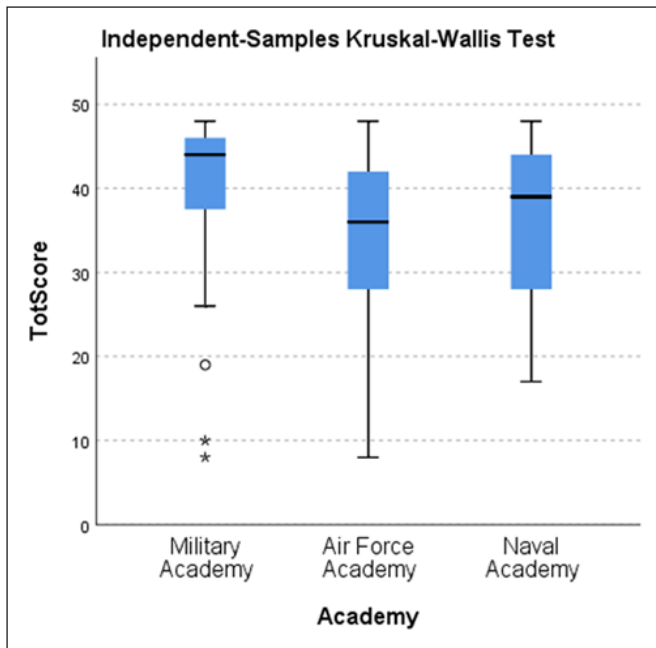
This section of the paper will first report the findings from the analysis of test results and then the questionnaire responses. Numbers in tables refer to percentages.

### RQ1 LANGUAGE PROFICIENCY RESULTS

RQ1 investigated the extent to which Norwegian officer cadets meet NCT for English language when they graduate from the academies. In group 1, ( $n = 63$ ), 10% of the test takers made the NCT for officers heading for NATO staff positions: L3 in all four skills. Another 41% of cadets had an SLP of minimum L2+ across all four skills, and thus met the NCT for officer deployments, exercises, and training (referred to below as “deployability”). This shows that, according to NCT, just over half the sample (51%) were linguistically ready to work with NATO allies in international contexts, in officer roles.

An independent-samples Kruskal-Wallis test showed no significant differences in the distribution of total scores across the three military academies:  $H(2) = 3.771$ ,  $p = .15$  (see [Figure 1](#)). However, crosstabulation outputs suggested a larger percentage of cadets at the Norwegian Military Academy had reached the NATO minimum language requirement of L2+ in all four skills compared to the two other academies. A one-way between-groups analysis of variance (ANOVA) was run to identify any statistically significant differences between the three military academies regarding NCT. The chi-square tests for independence showed an almost significant association between academy attended and deployability (Pearson Chi-Square asymptotic sig. = .053), with a medium effect size (Cramer's  $V = .308$ ). This analysis, then, could be taken to suggest cadets from the Norwegian Military Academy might have held a slight advantage in terms of reaching NCT.

Analysing the test results for listening ( $n = 104$ ), speaking ( $n = 63$ ), reading ( $n = 103$ ), and writing ( $n = 103$ ), the candidates achieved the best results in reading comprehension and speaking. Their next-best skill was listening, while writing turned out to be the weakest skill. 5% of candidates could not be awarded a level on their receptive skills tests, meaning their test scores were below the L2 band ([Table 1](#)).



**Figure 1** Distribution of total scores military academy, air force academy, and naval academy.

STANAG LEVEL	LISTENING (n = 104)	SPEAKING (n = 63)	READING (n = 103)	WRITING (n = 103)
Unratable	5%	0%	5%	0%
L2	31%	25%	19%	37%
L2+	36%	37%	35%	32%
L3	29%	38%	40%	31%
Score L2+ or higher	65%	75%	75%	63%

**Table 1** Test results all four skills.

## RQ2: QUESTIONNAIRE RESULTS

### ENGLISH LANGUAGE INSTRUCTION AND AWARENESS OF LEARNING OUTCOMES

The questionnaire responses showed that almost half the sample knew the English language learning outcomes in the study programme. A similar number claimed to know the NATO standard for English language. There was general agreement that the English language instruction delivered at their academy was relevant to the military profession and had prepared them well for working in English both in their home unit or when training with allies. However, close to a third of the sample (31%) felt they had not been adequately prepared for working with allies during international deployments (Table 2). Note that in the tables, Likert-scale results have been collapsed for pedagogical purposes. For detailed results, see Appendix B.

### OPINIONS ON ENGLISH LANGUAGE TRAINING

The sample considered all four skills valuable in the officer profession. There was general agreement about the importance of good pronunciation and intonation patterns and that more emphasis should be placed on training spoken language than on training writing skills. Less than half of the sample believed the English language tuition they had received at their respective academy would make them reach the NCT for officers.

Having an advanced level of English proficiency was considered important to the officer profession, although the sample believed that academy instructors and staff might be of a different opinion. Few respondents, however, considered English language training an area of priority. The overall majority nevertheless both agreed that English would be prioritised higher had a summative assessment (exam) been waiting and that language skills should be tested annually much like physical tests. There was strong agreement that English language learning outcomes should be comparable across the three academies, and that language-class

#	STATEMENT	AGREE	DISAGREE	n =
1	I am familiar with the NATO standard for English (STANAG 6001).	44.5	55.5	n = 101
2	I am familiar with the English learning outcomes at my academy.	44.6	55.4	n = 101
3	English tuition at my academy has appeared relevant to the military profession.	84.1	15.9	n = 101
4	English tuition at my academy has prepared me well for...			
4A	...cooperating with allies in exercises.	74.3	25.7	n = 101
4B	...cooperating with allies when on deployments.	69.3	30.7	n = 101

**Table 2** Language awareness.

attendance should be obligatory. Moreover, the sample believed language should be taught in the classroom; the suggestion that all English tuition should be offered online was opposed by 94% of the respondents. Accordingly, English language instruction at the military academies was not considered redundant: indeed, the majority claimed too little instruction had been offered during their bachelor study. Notwithstanding that observation, two thirds of the respondents considered their English language skills to rank above the national average (Table 3).

## DISCUSSION

The small number of graduating cadets reaching the NCT for NATO staff officers in all four skills (10%, RQ1) should raise some concern at the Norwegian Defence University College. It is not unwarranted to argue that at this point in an officer's career, having received English tuition as part of the bachelor study, proficiency levels should be higher. While more cadets reached the language level requirements for participation in operations, exercises, and training (41%), the implication is nevertheless that half of the officer corps need to improve their language capabilities before working in an international context. Where other NATO partner and member nations offer English refresher courses, no further language courses are offered to officers along their career paths in the Norwegian Armed Forces, leaving the responsibility for maintaining and improving linguistic skills to the individual.

The finding that no more than half of the sample knew what the NATO standard for English entailed, and even fewer believed they would reach the NATO language capability target for officers, lends

#	STATEMENT	AGREE	DISAGREE	n =
7B	An officer should have good pronunciation and intonation.	88.4	11.6	n = 95
8	English tuition at the academies should emphasise speaking over writing.	87.1	12.9	n = 93
9	The English tuition at my academy will make me reach NCT for officers.	35.5	64.5	n = 93
10	At my academy, cadets regard having good English skills as prestigious.	44.1	55.8	n = 95
11	Having good English skills is regarded as prestigious among the staff.	45.7	54.3	n = 94
12	At my academy, English is a subject that is highly prioritised by cadets.	5.3	94.7	n = 95
19	I consider my own English proficiency as above the Norwegian average.	62.7	37.3	n = 94
14	All English tuition at the academies should be attended on a voluntary basis.	2.1	97.9	n = 95
15	All English tuition at the military academies should be delivered online.	6.3	93.7	n = 95
13	English tuition is redundant as all cadets have studied English in high school.	6.4	93.6	n = 94
18	No. of lessons and learning outcomes for English should be comparable across the three military academies.	88.3	11.7	n = 94

**Table 3** The value and design of English tuition.



support to Djuric's (2008) conclusion that increased dialogue between military language-testing and language-teaching professionals would benefit not only STANAG test-takers but students in the military language classroom, too. If future officers do not know NATO's expectations of what they *can do* in the target language, working to achieve that level of proficiency will likely prove cumbersome, much like sitting for an exam without being aware of learning outcomes. Therefore, it is not unwarranted to argue there is a need for raising awareness about the differences between using English for military purposes and the NATO general language requirement. Mentioning the NATO language standard in the study guide might prove a beneficial first step.

Considering that English is a NATO command language, a certain paradox resides in the fact that few cadets (5%) considered English a prioritised area of study. This finding nevertheless resonates with Farr's study of 2016, which found that even highly motivated staff officer students were not interested in prioritising time and effort to improve their English proficiency. A possible explanation might be found in the previously mentioned popular belief that English proficiency in the Scandinavian countries is at such a high level that further efforts to improve are not needed. However, as far as Norwegian cadets are concerned, a more accurate explanation might be the lack of a final language exam; indeed, the sample agreed that English language learning would have been prioritised higher if some summative, credit-awarding assessment had been waiting. The implication is that if the Norwegian Defence University College wants more officer cadets to prioritise English language learning and reach NATO Capability Targets, formal assessment might have to be reintroduced.

The sample believed that more emphasis should be placed on training speaking than on training writing, suggesting they perceive spoken proficiency to be the aspect of language most central to the officer profession, also perhaps reflected in their high scores in speaking. Nevertheless, the cadets' scores were equally high in reading. Considering that the candidates were in the final stages of a bachelor's education, this finding is hardly surprising. A substantial part of the military bachelor syllabus consists of English publications, providing ample opportunity for, and training in, understanding written text, likely increasing reading speed in the target language. Notwithstanding these observations, 5% of the cadets in the sample scored below L2 in either or both receptive skills (listening and reading). This should provide food for thought for officer education programme managers regarding both selection criteria and stated learning outcomes. In terms of reaching NCT, which require the same level in all four skills, prioritising one skill over the others should at any rate not be encouraged.

Although digitalisation of teaching materials and the delivery of online classes continue to gain ground in many educational settings, our military students were not enthusiastic about online tuition. This finding is interesting given that this group of respondents gained extensive experience with online learning during the Covid pandemic. Delivering online courses presents a modern, progressive, and cost-friendly solution; nevertheless, it turned out that in the context of English language training, these Norwegian future officers not only preferred classroom instruction, they also believed attendance should be obligatory. This might be taken to indicate that certain intangibles present in the physical military-language classroom cannot be successfully recreated in online classes. As the sample are representatives of a digitally literate generation, their views on the balance between classroom teaching and the possibilities offered by technology and digitalisation should be explored further.

Regarding the study's potential shortcomings, differences in course plans and curricula were not examined. Although all academies educate officers to work within the NATO structure, teaching methods, the number of lessons, and syllabi vary between the three services. While it would have held merit from a pedagogical perspective, the extent to which differences in tuition might have had an impact on results was not investigated on account of the study's scope. Second, it cannot be ruled out that English-language instruction at the academies might have focused more on teaching service-specific military terminology rather than general proficiency in accordance with the NATO standard. This question was not included in the questionnaire since our study did not set out to compare syllabi. Finally, the group of cadets who were tested in all four skills was smaller than originally planned for. Nevertheless, within the field of language testing, 30 respondents constitute a statistically significant sample (Green, 2013). Hence, extrapolation from findings is possible with our group of 63. These identified shortcomings suggest further research is needed within the areas of military language curriculum development and course

design, and the balance between training specific-purpose terminology and training general English proficiency in the military language classroom.

Despite some limitations in the scope of the study, our findings nevertheless suggest four recommendations can be made. First, the Norwegian Defence University College should acknowledge that since Norway has ratified the NATO language standard, language instruction should be tailored accordingly, with comparable learning outcomes across the three academies. Second, learning outcomes for English language training should be communicated clearly and a reference to NATO STANAG 6001 should be included in study-guides. This would raise awareness among cadets that, in the military profession, English language is not just nice to know, there is an actual *need* to know. Third, language instruction should continue to be delivered primarily face-to-face. While web-based courses may have a lot to offer in terms of resources spent, cadets considered online tuition suboptimal for training language skills. Fourth, summative assessment of cadets' English proficiency could be reintroduced to help serve as a motivating factor for English language study. An alternative approach might be to conduct systematic formative assessment guided by the NATO proficiency level descriptors. Either would likely contribute to more graduating officers reaching the NCT for English language.

## CONCLUSION

The present study documents the extent to which Norwegian officer cadets meet NATO Capability Targets for English language at the time of graduation, something important to establish given the emphasis placed on the effects of language on interoperability by the alliance itself. Our study found that while the Norwegian cadet sample recognised the necessity of advanced English proficiency when working as officers (RQ2), no more than half the sample reached the NATO language requirements for officers (RQ1). Combined, these findings suggest that in the Norwegian military educational setting, greater focus should be placed on NATO language requirements and assessment practices.

To our knowledge, no studies of this kind have been published before, and findings thus contribute to the literature on language testing in the NATO alliance (Green & Wall, 2005; DiBiase & Gratton, 2015; Grande et al., 2022), presenting unique perspectives and observations made by adult learners on English language tuition and linguistic needs within a professional specific-purpose content domain. Test results and respondents' opinions should therefore be of interest to the military educational institutions of NATO members and partner nations, with a view to further enhancing professional military education. It is hoped that the findings of the present study may help inform decision-makers of the need for English language assessment in accordance with the NATO standard when developing pedagogical models and curriculum design. Not only would an increased focus on language proficiency contribute to the improvement of professional military education and spur the academic debate on language education in the armed forces; it would, most importantly, enhance interoperability within the NATO alliance.

## DATA ACCESSIBILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding authors, upon reasonable request.

## ADDITIONAL FILES

The additional files for this article can be found as follows:

- **Appendix A.** Examples of reading, writing, and speaking tasks. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.31374/sjms.221.s1>
- **Appendix B.** Questionnaire to participants. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.31374/sjms.221.s2>

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The authors have no competing interests to declare.

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