

# Foreign Language Capabilities

Improved talent management is needed

by John Durish, Kevin Johnston & Maj Genevieve Studer

The expeditionary nature of the Marine Corps demands a talent management system that aligns foreign language capabilities with a wide array of mission requirements. These requirements include, but are not limited to, the ability to directly engage foreign nationals in their native language, perform intelligence operations, and enable war-fighting functions inherent to security cooperation, expeditionary advanced base operations, and beyond. In his recent *Interim National Security Strategic Guidance*, the President of the United States repeatedly highlighted his strategy to lean on diplomacy as the primary posture for international relations and a focus on rebuilding the Nation's network of alliances and partnerships. At this time, however, the Marine Corps is hampered by a manpower system that the 38th Commandant describes as, "designed in the industrial era to produce mass, not quality." In his 2019 *Commandant's Planning Guidance*, Gen David H. Berger explains:

We assumed that quantity of personnel was the most important element of the system, and that workers (Marines) are all essentially interchangeable. As the complexity of the world has increased, the spread between physical jobs and thinking jobs has increased dramatically. War still has a physical component, and all Marines need to be screened and ready to fight. However, we have not adapted to the needs of the current battlefield.

The Marine Corps' need for foreign language capabilities across the fluency spectrum will increase in the coming years. As Marines deploy around the

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world, they conduct operations and have direct communication with local nationals. Furthermore, it is important that Marines possess these foreign language capabilities and that the Marine Corps not over rely on contracted employees. Contracted linguists, interpreters, and translators do not always understand military jargon or culture and lack the physical capabilities of Marines, limiting their full employability in austere locations. Marines who can support their commands with language capabilities can help ensure successful mission completion; their presence can save lives not only on the battlefield but also limit collateral damage among local populations.

To address talent management issues such as these, the Assistant Commandant of the Marine Corps, via the Talent Management Executive Committee, established a Language Operational Planning Team (OPT) to examine language testing and capability utilization. During its investigations, the OPT recognized that *the Marine Corps is unable to effectively and accurately identify language requirements, which results in validation and management gaps for foreign language capability at every Marine command echelon.* These

gaps result in decreased readiness and an inability to posture the right Marine, with the right language, in the right place, at the right time. The OPT developed three principle lines of effort to improve language talent management: enhance the Marine Corps' ability to identify language requirements, assess if the Marine Corps effectively validates language capabilities, and analyze existing talent management of language capabilities in order to identify areas to improve. These lines of effort are designed to benefit critical MOSs by identifying language capable Marines at the beginning of their careers, possibly offsetting the cost of training them at the Defense Language Institute Foreign Language Center. These identified Marines could also be better candidates for a Foreign Area Officer/Foreign Area Senior non-commissioned officer billet or even for a career in Marine Corps Forces Special Operations Command. Every special forces or special operations team require enablers (medics, drivers, supply Marines, cooks, etc.); therefore, regardless of their primary MOS, language-capable Marines can fill a pivotal niche. Every Marine is first and foremost a rifleman; even if they are not selected for one of these options, the

additional language skill set potentially makes them invaluable assets on routine missions.

Identifying requirements for depth and breadth of language capability across the fluency spectrum is the first step to solving how the Marine Corps employs its language capable Marines. As the Nation's premier force in readiness, the Marine Corps faces threats ranging across the global commons, where Marines regularly find themselves in contact with a wide array of foreign language speakers. In an environment where over 6,000 different languages and dialects are spoken, determining which language will be needed and when is a complex but not impossible task. The Language OPT has identified broad functional areas—including security cooperation and operations in the information environment—to examine and is taking steps to improve how force development requirements are formulated. In lieu of a perfect solution, the Language OPT must continue to look at the other broad problem sets of identifying individual language capabilities and managing Marines' talents. The Language OPT will seek to follow the *Commandant's Planning Guidance* and "not wait for perfect clarity when it comes to forecasting the future operating environment," ensuring that perfect does not stifle movement in the right direction.

Once capability requirements are recognized, the Marine Corps needs to improve how it identifies latent foreign language talent. The problem of identifying language-capable Marines lies in recognizing, assessing, and reporting capabilities. Marines can self-profess a language capability in Section I, Part 13 of the DDI966 when they enlist or by filling out a simple module on *Marine Online*. Although not required, when Marines do choose to profess a language skill, the current system does not require them to undergo an official assessment via the DOD's standardized test, the Defense Language Proficiency Test (DLPT). The DLPT is currently the Marine Corps' only method of identifying and tracking language capability across its ranks. Nurturing and then capitalizing on those capabilities in the

right context remains an additional hurdle for the Marine Corps today. It takes years to master a language, and it is a perishable skill. Revamping how the Marine Corps identifies, tracks, and retains existing language talent is a first step in being more proactive—especially with the recognition of the difficulty of forecasting future conflict zones.

Once language speakers are identified, they must be effectively tracked and their skill set made available to commanders at every level; this is the simple crux of talent management. Communicating language capabilities across the Marine Corps requires a ubiquitous information system linked between commands and accessible at all echelons. In the simplest terms, a commander cannot use what he does not know that he has. Currently, there are several disparate systems that make finding language capability information difficult for even the savviest leader. As a result, even if a Marine has self-identified, or taken the DLPT, the results are not always readily available—or clear—to commanders. To optimize talent management at the tactical level, DLPT scores must be as readily available as physical fitness and marksmanship scores. This current lack of visibility of language capability prevents units from communicating with Allies with whom they are training and potentially deprives linguistically qualified Marines of the opportunity to highlight those abilities in the field and on behalf of their units' missions. A possible solution involves linking the DLPT information that is stored in MCTFS and *Marine Online* to Command Profile and to delineate a Marine's DLPT score with a date or to mark it as "self-professed and untested."

In support of identifying language capabilities and enabling talent management, the Marine Corps must do a better job of incentivizing Marines to self-identify and address ad hoc capability requirements. There are several potential incentives for Marines to take the DLPT without incurring additional financial burdens to the enterprise. For example, encourage Marines to take the DLPT by incorporating test results

into the overall cutting scores for junior Marines and educate small unit leaders on the potential value to both the individual Marine and the Corps. Additionally, new recruits can be promoted directly to private first class out of Boot Camp if they score above a 2/2 on the DLPT. Midshipmen in Marine ROTC scholarship programs and at the U.S. Naval Academy are not currently required to take language courses as part of their bachelor's degree education. Offering DLPT opportunities for midshipmen and incentivizing taking the test through academic standing scores either toward graduation or at The Basic School after commissioning may help the Marine Corps identify incoming language talent.

Increased visibility of language capability at the unit level will enable units training OCONUS to identify language speakers within their ranks who are ready to provide immediate, accurate, and unbiased translations. In addition to resolving language problems, these Marines will also help their peers bond more easily and quickly with their allied nations and partners at the tactical level. Once these steps are enacted, not only the individual Marines but the Corps writ large stand to benefit. Marines will have their valuable skills documented and have more flexibility in pursuing a career path they desire. This flexibility will result in higher retention rates and help the military retain its most needed skill sets. Additionally, the Marine Corps will enjoy newfound capabilities and skills, ensuring adaptability in environments where foreign languages are prevalent. Implementing the cost-efficient controls proposed in this article is a small part of ensuring that the Marine Corps remains the world's most lethal fighting force.

