

# The sergeants speak: A language needs analysis of the Royal Netherlands Army

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**Abstract** This mixed-method study identified the English language needs of Royal Netherlands Army sergeants to define language tasks and proficiency requirements. Participants for the Needs Analysis consisted of 62 former infantry sergeants and 11 subject matter experts. Data was collected through interviews and a questionnaire, and analyzed using a combination of open coding and descriptive statistics. Results detail when, where, and how soldiers use English. Twenty-six language tasks were identified, with a focus on military missions and multinational training exercises where using English was critical. Participants consider English essential in more senior roles, while experts recommend B1-level reading and listening, and A2-level speaking, with a focus on issuing orders. These results informed the proficiency requirements and the redesign of the English curriculum. This study serves as a model for needs analyses in specialized work environments.

**Keywords** language need, military, Needs Analysis, design research, task-based language teaching

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See p. 11–12

## 1 Introduction

The Royal Netherlands Army relies on its sergeants and other non-commissioned officers (NCOs) to accomplish its duties (Moyer, 2016). Prior interviews with superiors revealed high expectations of NCO language capabilities as they often partake in operations where English is the lingua franca. To foster interoperability, NATO issued Force Goal EG0356, requiring level 2 listening and reading and level 1+ writing and speaking proficiency in these situations (NATO Standardization Office, 2016). Although an exact comparison to the CEFR is not possible due to differing criteria and frameworks (Bureau for International Language Coordination, 2018), proficiency goals roughly correspond to B1 and A2, respectively.

Before NCOs are ready for deployment, they receive their initial training at the Royal Military School in Ermelo (Ministerie van Defensie, 2021). NCO attainment goals are listed in the NCO qualification profile, which defines competencies, tasks, and skills (Veringa, 2014). This document, compiled by Royal Military School staff, states that an entry-level sergeant meets the national vocational education requirements A2 proficiency in productive skills and B1 in receptive skills (Verhoorn & de

Bruijn, 2020). The current qualification profile does not mention specific language-related tasks, but it does highlight that NCOs need to be able to carry out language tasks related to decision-making. In the current curriculum, students receive 28 hours of English lessons over a 14-week period where recruits work toward issuing a standard NATO order (a directive or instruction given to military personnel) for ten soldiers.

By 2025, the Defence Language Centre aims to formalize language requirements, tackling concerns like: the vague definition of language tasks and levels in the qualification profile, the formative nature of language competency assessment, and inadequate preparation for authentic communicative situations.

The Royal Military School sought to define language tasks and proficiency requirements, requesting the Defence Language Centre to conduct a Needs Analysis of NCOs in their first post-graduation role. The results would provide input for updating the qualification profile and language curriculum. This produced the following research question:

What are the English language needs of junior infantry NCOs in the Royal Netherlands Army?

Five sub-questions guided the research:

1. What types of tasks are carried out in English?
2. What are their frequency and criticality?
3. What is the language proficiency needed to successfully execute these tasks?
4. What contextual factors affect language use?
5. What specific elements should be incorporated in the curriculum?

## 1.1 Needs Analysis

A Need Analysis (NA) is crucial for defining relevant language tasks and proficiency requirements, ensuring language programs meet the demands of specific work environments (Malicka et al., 2019). Insider expertise is often the most valuable input (Wozniak, 2010), yet NAs are frequently overlooked in curriculum development (Long, 2005). Typically, NAs involve a collaborative process. For example, Lett (2005) worked with army personnel and foreign language experts in the US Army to assess task frequency, difficulty, and proficiency needs, which informed language policy revisions. Gilabert (2023) adds that training needs, based on task importance and priority, should also guide task selection.

While interviews and questionnaires are common in NAs (Lambert, 2010; Wozniak, 2010; Sari & Sari, 2020), others highlight the value of discourse analysis (Downey Bartlett, 2005; Long, 2005), though access to real-world scenarios can be restricted by confiden-

tiality (Long, 2005). Despite varying methods, the goal of NAs remains to identify tasks that align with learners' real-world needs (Long, 2005).

## 1.2 Language tasks

A language task is defined as an activity necessitating the target language to obtain an objective (van den Branden, 2010). The objective is for learners to advance in second language acquisition by participating in tasks mirroring authentic discourse. Tasks should link to real-world activities, emphasize communicative meaning, feature an information gap, and result in language as a tool for achieving outcomes (East, 2021). One feature of using tasks is that learners are stimulated to rely on their own (non-linguistic) resources to reach a communicative goal (Ellis & Shintani, 2013). This research focused on identifying target tasks, also called real-world tasks. These tasks are genuine examples of what learners could encounter outside the language classroom (Bygate, 2015). Each step within a target task works toward accomplishing the target task and is not dependent on or part of another task, as example (1) illustrates:

(1) Being able to orally issue a standard NATO order in English.

Target sub-tasks, see example (2), are identical but dependent on another target task (Gilabert, 2005).

(2) Answering double-check questions from the group during the issue of an order.

The examples above illustrate the need for specialized language skills in field-specific communication. Task achievement should take precedence over language competency assessment, as experienced workers can often leverage their expertise to compensate for limited language proficiency and effectively complete tasks within their professional domain (Long, 2005). Besides task outcomes, the underlying proficiency construct for task completion is crucial in identifying the specific language features essential for achieving task goals. Defining this construct and its facets allows for articulating varying levels of student performance, which can be linked to grades and aid in task assessment (East, 2021).

## 1.3 Language proficiency assessment in the military

Armies may use different scales for assessing language proficiency. NATO standardization agreement 6001 (STANAG 6001) contains a language scale with descriptors for different occupations within their military structure. Language levels can be categorized as beginner (Levels 0 and 1), intermediate (Levels 2 and 3), and advanced (Levels 4 and 5) (NATO

Standardization Office, 2016). These categories roughly correspond to CEFR's A, B, and C levels.

Besides STANAG 6001, European armies mainly use CEFR. Their can-do definitions are instrumental in a more nuanced assessment of progress than an exclusive focus on test scores (Council of Europe, 2020). The additional use of CEFR levels by certain nations enhances the employability of retiring military personnel, since a conversion from STANAG is not feasible.

## 2 Method

This Needs Analysis (NA) relied on qualitative and quantitative data gathering, utilizing a document analysis of the NCO qualification profile, interviews, and a questionnaire. Carefully sequenced, the methods moved from open procedures like unstructured interviews to more closed ones like a questionnaire with a Likert scale (Long, 2005).

### 2.1 Participants

The Needs Analysis involved sixty-four NCOs through interviews and a questionnaire. For the context analysis, one officer and two NCOs from army command participated. Language proficiency requirements were determined by subject matter experts and stakeholders, including a Royal Military School representative, the qualification officer, two senior instructors, the senior English teacher, the education manager, and the language qualification expert.

Possible concerns regarding validity and reliability pertain to NA data being largely retrospective. Since missions differ in size and objectives, individual recollections varied. To factor this in, participants were selected via a random stratified sample (Lett, 2005). When this was impossible, a cluster sample from sub-groups was used (Long, 2005). Subject matter experts and stakeholders were selected via purposive sampling (Nieveen, 2010). By triangulating participants and data collection, the internal validity of the findings was enhanced (Nieveen, 2010). Due to their inexperience in the workplace, military students were not selected to participate (Long, 2005).

### 2.2 Document analysis

With regards to the NA, language types, contexts of use, and language requirements were determined by analyzing job descriptions, manuals, and language proficiency documents, using a content analysis approach (de Lange et al., 2016). The results of this analysis were then quantified through descriptive statistics, which helped prioritize tasks based on frequency, difficulty, and criticality, ultimately guiding the refinement of the task list.

### 2.3 Interviews

Unstructured interviews with three NCOs helped identify language tasks and participants for the structured interviews, with follow-up questions focusing on task frequency, difficulty, and training necessity (Long, 2005). Participants were interviewed at their workplace, though one interview was conducted online due to availability, and two participants were interviewed simultaneously to accommodate time constraints. All interviews were transcribed verbatim for qualitative analysis (de Lange et al., 2016). To enhance interpretative validity, member checks – where participants review and verify the accuracy of the researchers' interpretations – were conducted a week later (Yanow & Schwartz-Shea, 2014). Reliability was optimized through pilot coding with an independent coder, followed by benchmark sessions that achieved 90 % intercoder agreement. Post-coding, peer debriefing, and member checking followed.

The language tasks identified in the first round of interviews were further examined for task type, frequency, difficulty, language proficiency needed, and context of language use during structured interviews with six NCOs. Additional tasks identified during these interviews were added to the questionnaire.

Three structured interviews with one officer and two NCOs from army command were conducted for the context analysis. Transcripts were analyzed using focused coding on themes relevant to the research objectives, such as English proficiency requirements, current use, curriculum needs, and the future role of English in the army. To ensure reliability, the coding was piloted with an independent coder, achieving 85 % intercoder agreement.

### 2.4 Questionnaire

A questionnaire with 26 identified tasks from the interviews was distributed to NCOs via an anonymous link (see Appendix) to corroborate language needs across a representative sample. This improved the reliability and validity of the earlier NA results (Long, 2005). Fifty-seven participants (98.2 % male; 85.9 % vocational education; 14.1 % pre-academic education; years of military experience,  $M=13$ ,  $SD=6.79$ ) completed the questionnaire, which was administered in Dutch to mitigate low response rates (Jasso-Aguilar, 2005). Using a 5-point Likert Scale, participants rated tasks, such as receiving and transmitting operational radio messages, covering frequency, difficulty, importance, training needs, and technical language use.

Final questions asked for comments and whether responses were based on deployments, military exercises, or work placements. Participants could also submit additional information. Results were analyzed using descriptive statistics on task frequency, difficulty, criticality, training needs, and military English usage. A weighted scoring approach prioritized tasks based on these factors, ranking them sequentially by their overall impact on mission success and training requirements.

## 2.5 Defining language requirements

Two meetings were held with military and language proficiency experts. The first meeting discussed questionnaire results and identified four tasks that were deemed relevant for the curriculum. In the second meeting, tasks were rated on CEFR levels by the language proficiency experts.

## 2.6 Ethical considerations

This study was approved by the senior communication advisor of the Royal Netherlands Army and the Chief of Staff of the Defence Language Centre. Although no formal ethics committee review was conducted, the approval process included a review to ensure adherence to ethical standards. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, and confidentiality was maintained throughout the study.

## 3 Results

The results are presented in the following order: discrepancy in proficiency requirements, key language tasks identified, context of language use, training needs, and proficiency level ratings. Each section is based on data from interviews, questionnaires, and expert assessments, highlighting key findings and their relevance to curriculum redesign.

### 3.1 Discrepancy in proficiency requirements

With regard to language requirements for NCOs, a discrepancy was found between the qualification profile and STANAG 6001. Task types and contexts in STANAG 6001 are generic, whereas the qualification profile lists specific task types and contexts. The language proficiency standards are similar, though the qualification profile explicitly demands conversational proficiency.

### 3.2 Key language tasks identified

The interviews and questionnaire responses identified 26 key language tasks that NCOs commonly face, emphasizing the importance of listening, speaking, and conversational skills during military operations. These tasks were encountered most frequently during deployments and multinational exercises. Participants highlighted the criticality of effective communication in international settings, particularly in tasks requiring English for radio communications, informal interactions, and issuing operational orders.

**Table 1** Top five tasks from structured interviews with NCOs and the questionnaire

Task	Frequency			Criticality		Difficulty	
	<i>n</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Reading an order or terrain description	45	2.74	0.86	3.77	0.80	2.30	0.94
Informal contact with colleagues	43	3.35	0.96	2.52	1.19	2.23	0.92
Receive, translate, and send radio traffic	41	3.49	1.11	4.53	0.42	4.03	0.76
Listening to the issue of an order	37	2.43	0.99	3.24	1.32	2.70	1.15
Verbally translating an order from English	29	2.71	0.99	3.65	0.82	2.65	0.93

Table 1 summarizes the top five tasks based on frequency, criticality, and difficulty as reported by participants, with ratings based on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly disagree to 5 = Strongly agree). The task “Receive, translate, and send radio traffic” ranked highest in criticality, with participants emphasizing the challenges posed by unfamiliar accents and technical terminology. Other tasks, such as “Listening to the issue of an order” and “Informal contact with colleagues,” were rated as common but less difficult compared to radio communications.

Participants reported that radio communication in English, particularly during high-stress situations, was the most challenging task. Tasks requiring informal contact with colleagues were noted as less difficult but still essential for maintaining operational cohesion within multinational teams. The need for military-specific vocabulary was also emphasized, particularly for tasks involving reading (*M* = 3.93, *SD* = 0.57), listening to (*M* = 3.94, *SD* = 0.75), or translating an order (*M* = 4.03, *SD* = 0.60).

3.3 Context of language use

Participants reported several challenges when using English during deployments, military exercises, and daily work-related activities, especially in international environments. The primary difficulties included understanding unfamiliar accents, navigating limited English proficiency among international colleagues, and managing technical military jargon. These challenges were particularly noted during radio communications and when issuing operational orders, where clarity and precision were critical.

Table 2 outlines the situations on which respondents based their answers. The percentages represent the frequency of responses (*f*), as participants could select multiple options. The majority of responses reflected experiences from military exercises (36 %) and deployments (26 %).

Participants also noted that the lack of proficiency of international colleagues often complicated task execution, particularly in coalition operations where communication

**Table 2** Situation participants based their answers on

Answer	<i>f</i>	%
Military exercises	48	36.36
Deployments	34	25.76
Training and education	33	25.00
Daily work	17	12.88

in English was necessary for mission success. Difficulties in understanding accents and low language proficiency among partners led to misunderstandings and inefficiencies, especially in operational settings that required swift and accurate communication.

Despite these challenges, participants emphasized that speaking exercises during military training were beneficial, though specialized military vocabulary was identified as an area needing improvement. Participants expressed the need for more realistic, task-based language training, particularly focused on the types of communication required during international missions.

3.4 Training needs and recommendations

Participants consistently reported a need for enhanced English language training, specifically in areas related to military operations and international collaboration. While basic English proficiency was considered sufficient for many tasks, participants emphasized the need for additional training in speaking and writing skills, as well as the incorporation of military-specific vocabulary. This was particularly noted for tasks involving radio communications and issuing orders.

Table 3 summarizes the top five tasks where participants indicated a need for further language training, based on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly disagree to 5 = Strongly agree).

Participants emphasized that the most significant training needs arose in reading and listening to orders (briefings). Reading an order or terrain description had the highest training need ( $M = 3.11$ ,  $SD = 1.13$ ), followed by listening to operational orders ( $M = 2.81$ ,  $SD = 1.18$ ) and verbally translating orders ( $M = 2.81$ ,  $SD = 1.15$ ).

Participants also noted that military exercises and missions exposed gaps in training, particularly when NCOs had to communicate in English under pressure. Suggestions for improvement included mission-oriented language preparation that simulates real-world scenarios, with a focus on both formal and informal communications.



**Table 3** Questionnaire results pertaining to training needs

Task	Training need (M)	SD
Reading an order or terrain description	3.11	1.13
Verbally translating an order from English	2.81	1.15
Receive, translate, and send radio traffic	2.73	1.26
Listening to the issue of an order	2.61	1.18
Informal contact with colleagues	2.46	1.04

**Table 4** Task ratings by subject matter experts

Task	<i>n</i>	Language proficiency level
Receive, translate, and send radio messages	5	Speaking A2; Listening B1
Reading an order or terrain description	3	Reading B1
Listening to the issue of an order	3	Listening B1
Issuing an order orally	3	Speaking A2

3.5 Proficiency level ratings and curriculum implications

During two meetings with military and language experts, key language tasks for curriculum redesign were identified. All tasks with three or more votes from the experts were prioritized. Language proficiency levels for these tasks were assessed using the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR), as shown in Table 4.

Teachers and military subject matter experts assessed the tasks at A2 and B1 levels, depending on the complexity of the task and the communication required. Speaking tasks such as issuing orders were rated at A2, while listening and reading tasks were rated at B1 due to the need for higher comprehension skills.

These ratings informed the development of the redesigned curriculum, with a strong emphasis on military-specific terminology. The adoption of the CEFR scale was preferred over STANAG 6001 for two reasons: first, to ensure that soldiers’ language qualifications could be transferable to civilian career prospects, and second, because testing all military personnel at STANAG levels would require significant resources and time.

Policymakers discussed whether passing English should be a formal requirement for graduation, but no consensus was reached due to concerns about workforce shortages in the military possibly being exacerbated.

## 4 Discussion and conclusions

This research investigated the English language needs of junior infantry NCOs in the Royal Netherlands Army by identifying language tasks and establishing the corresponding proficiency requirements. The Needs Analysis revealed a diverse range of tasks that NCOs carry out in English, with 26 task types identified. Key tasks – such as reading orders, listening to orders, issuing orders, and radio communication – were deemed critical, especially during deployments and multinational exercises. The findings highlight that while English use is most prominent in these operational contexts, its importance grows as NCOs progress to higher command levels, underscoring the need for specific language preparation early in their careers.

The language proficiency required to execute these tasks was predominantly rated at A2 and B1 levels (see Table 4). This suggests that NCOs typically operate at a level of English sufficient to complete routine tasks. However, these proficiency levels may not fully equip them for the demands of international cooperation, particularly in high-stakes, real-time communication settings. For instance, radio communication – where clarity and precision are essential – requires a strong command of military-specific vocabulary. These findings indicate that the language tasks identified must be reflected in any curriculum update, with a focus on ensuring that training covers both routine and complex tasks.

The results also revealed important contextual factors influencing language use. NCOs highlighted challenges related to working with NATO and coalition partners, especially in environments where communication is impacted by stressful conditions and the limited English proficiency of international colleagues. This suggests that proficiency in handling such real-world communication barriers is critical to operational success, emphasizing the importance of context-specific language training.

Frequency and criticality of tasks also varied, with certain tasks – like reading and issuing orders – occurring more often during deployments, where their successful execution becomes critical to mission outcomes. The high frequency of these tasks in deployment contexts reinforces the need to train NCOs early in language skills that reflect the reality of modern military operations, especially as stakeholders noted that military operations are shifting from small-scale peacekeeping to larger battalion-level deployments.

While policymakers could not reach a consensus on the formal assessment of English proficiency, the decision to use CEFR levels reflects an effort to standardize language training across the military. However, the ongoing debate about whether English proficiency should be a formal graduation requirement highlights the need for further discussion on how language training fits into the broader NCO training framework. These results provide a foundation for such discussions, by clearly outlining the language tasks and proficiency levels required for success in NCO roles.

The study also highlighted limitations, such as the variability in task frequency across different missions and roles. Some respondents reported that English becomes more

relevant at senior NCO levels, while others emphasized its importance in all operational contexts. This variation suggests that future studies should explore cross-specialization language needs to provide a more comprehensive view of English language requirements across different NCO roles.

#### 4.1 Implications for Needs Analysis in specialized work environments

The findings from this study contribute to a growing understanding of the importance of a Needs Analysis (NA) in specialized work environments like the military. By identifying the specific language tasks and proficiency levels required, this study provides a critical resource for informing curriculum design, though that was not the primary focus. The task-based approach employed here aligns with the recommendations of Lett (2005) and Long (2005), emphasizing the value of identifying authentic, operationally relevant tasks.

These insights not only support the development of military training programs but may also serve as a foundation for future research in other specialized fields. The task-based approach used in this study, with its focus on real-world tasks and operational demands, could provide a useful framework for NAs in sectors such as aviation, healthcare, or emergency services, where clear, accurate communication is equally critical. By adapting this method to different professional contexts, researchers can better understand the language needs associated with high-stakes communication.

This research also underscores the necessity of continually updating NAs to reflect evolving operational demands, as military contexts shift and the nature of communication changes. By incorporating both military and language experts, this study ensured that the analysis aligned with the real-world needs of NCOs, offering a model for future NAs in similar fields. Although this research focused on infantry NCOs, its findings lay the groundwork for broader investigations into the language needs of other military specializations.

#### Author contributions

Martijn Prins: conceptualization, methodology, formal analysis, investigation, data curation, writing – original draft; Rick de Graaff: supervision – provided academic supervision, guidance on research design, and feedback on the manuscript; Trenton Hagar: supervision – contributed to conceptual discussions, supervised the project, and reviewed the manuscript; Jett Wilson: writing – review and editing. Contributed to the revision of the manuscript by providing feedback on clarity, structure, and language use.

#### Data availability

Data available on request from the authors.

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## Statement of interest

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

## Statement of technology use

No AI-based generative technology was used in the preparation of this manuscript and the execution of the research that the manuscript reports upon.

## Supporting information

Appendix: Questionnaire

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## Appendix: Questionnaire

### *Research: The Use of English among (Former) Infantry Squad Leaders*

#### Algemene informatie

Beste collega,

De volgende vragenlijst gaat over uw ervaring als groepscommandant infanterie tijdens de eerste vier jaar van uw loopbaan. Mocht u eerder van functie zijn gewisseld, beantwoord de vragen dan op basis van de periode dat u als groepscommandant heeft gefunctioneerd. De resultaten worden gebruikt om in kaart te brengen hoe groepscommandanten Engels gebruiken in de praktijk – tijdens uitzendingen, oefeningen en reguliere dienst in Nederland. Uw antwoorden zijn belangrijk om de missiegereedheid in het Engels te behouden of te verbeteren, en om het onderwijs aan de KMS beter te laten aansluiten op de praktijk. Uw antwoorden worden anoniem verwerkt, opgeslagen in een beveiligde omgeving, en na zes maanden automatisch verwijderd. Het invullen duurt maximaal 10 minuten.

Bij vragen of opmerkingen kunt u contact opnemen met (geanonimiseerd).

Hartelijk dank voor uw bijdrage.

Met vriendelijke groet,

(geanonimiseerd)

#### Achtergrondvragen

- Toestemming gegevensverwerking
- Leeftijd, geslacht, jaar in dienst, jaar gestart als groepscommandant
- Bataljon en compagnie
- Engelstalige achtergrond uzelf/ouder(s)
- Frequentie Engels gebruik voor KMS
- Hoogst afgeronde opleiding voor KMS

#### Opmerking bij vragen 1-26a

De volgende items hebben dezelfde opbouw:

- **Deel A:** Heeft u de genoemde situatie meegemaakt? (*Ja/Nee*)
- **Deel B:** Indien ja, geef aan in hoeverre u het hiermee eens bent:

#	Vraag	1 = Sterk mee oneens → 5 = Sterk mee eens
1	Ik moest dit vaak doen	
2	Dit ervaarde ik als moeilijk	
3	Dit was belangrijk voor mijn functie of missie	
4	Achteraf gezien had ik behoefte aan taaltraining	
5	Hierbij kwam veel vaktaal (Defensiejargon) voor	

Voorbeelditem

1. *Heeft u een Engelstalige tekst moeten lezen (bijv. order, gebiedsbeschrijving, cursusonderdeel, e-mailverkeer)?*  
→ Beantwoord dan vraag 1a op basis van bovenstaande schaal.

Deze structuur geldt voor vragen 1 t/m 26a, inclusief taken zoals deelname aan Engelstalige cursussen, gebruik van communicatieapparatuur, het vertalen en geven van bevelen, instructies en het schrijven van rapportages.

Laatste vragen

27. *Waarop zijn uw antwoorden gebaseerd? (Meerdere antwoorden mogelijk)*  
– Uitzending(en)  
– Oefening(en)  
– Mijn dagelijkse werk op de kazerne  
– Training en opleiding
28. *Heeft u verder nog aanvullingen op het gebruik van Engels als onderofficier?*