

TEACHING MILITARY STUDENTS A QUALITY ENGLISH WITH FICTION

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Once a reputable Russian journalist A.G. Nevzorov shocked the public with a provocative statement that nowadays fiction is a relic not to waste time on, and only professional and scientific literature is capable of meeting all our needs. The statement caused a lot of debate online. But one of the comments which belongs to the famous writer T. Tolstaya was short and witty “We should read good quality fiction Not to walk on four limbs anymore.” I believe this is a good rationale to include fiction into the curriculum

Military students should know much more than just how to pull a trigger. In essence, being a good soldier means not only being fit in body but also fit in mind, in the other words morally and intellectually prepared. How to reach the above goal? My answer is quality fiction.

They need good examples to analyse and follow not thoughtlessly but consciously. How to achieve this purpose? The answer is quality fiction.

Military students are citizens of the 21st century. Today's Army has to adapt quickly to differing cultures, possess foreign culture awareness especially when they find themselves responding to multiple crises. Therefore one of the basic skills to achieve the goal is English. But acquiring this skill stands all the chances to become routine without fiction. Quality text or a poem can add the spice to any English class, and the teacher should sprinkle a bit of it throughout every lesson.

Today we push students to master academic language and often neglect their emotional reactions, which can be very handy. Emotional responses to literature may become a trigger and driving force at the lesson. That's why an emotional response should be part of the curriculum.

But here comes another point of significance, quoting from Palmer “good teaching comes from the identity and the integrity of the teacher”, "we teach who we are". The success of using fiction in class depends on his or her intelligence and erudition, because excitement brought in the classroom is a result of careful

selection of fiction piece, while teaching strategy also matters. Therefore, English teachers should not adopt a strategy, however well-intentioned, if they do not believe that it is consistent with whom they are.

The reading list of English teachers should include different categories: great historical battles, outstanding military leaders, armies at war, returning from war etc. It will enable them to allow their students to choose the topics that best suit their interests. Still the main focus should be on the human at war as with all the advancement in military technologies the soldier with his boots on the ground has remained a permanent focus.

There is a host of books and authors at their disposal: “Farewell to arms” or “For whom the bell tolls” by E. Hemingway, “The last Hero” by R. Aldington, “Christmas truce” by M. Brown. There are plenty of war poems by S. Sassoon such as “They”, “The Troops”, “The trench duty” or “The responsibility” by P. Appleton, which are short, emotional and thought provoking. Contemporary military literature also offers an extended range of books and young English teachers can provide a fresh choice to their students being more knowledgeable in the field.

However, the choice of fiction depends on the level of student group, their capabilities. With students of pre-intermediate level, one can start with six-word-stories. For instance, “Sorry soldier, shoes sold in pairs”. The teacher can invite students to guess the implications of the writer and develop them further. Then one should give them extended information about the “Lost generation” who came back from the First World War to scarcity and disappointment when their jobs were taken and they turned out to be completely unwanted with their experience of atrocities and absurdity of the war. Anyway, such short stories work as a challenge and provoke analyses.

But all the above however well-intentioned stuff is hard to put into practice. The main challenge is today’s teenager obsessed with video games, movies, and series. They are often hard to shake up. They prefer pictures to letters and for them fiction stories need actors to bring them to life and makeup and digital tricks to

make the drama feel real. That's why English teacher can start with books which have popular screen versions such as Full Metal Jacket, From here to Eternity, The Thin Red Line, Apocalypse Now and a lot of others. It is better to question students on their preferences.

The role of the teacher is not to be a sage on the stage but provide all the necessary guidance and help students clear away roadblocks such as specific vocabulary or grammar patterns of the text. Worksheets carefully structured can perfectly serve the purpose. Below is the example of one, arranged to discuss implications of the poem "They" by an English poet Siegfried Sassoon. The interactive model fits well as the teaching method here. The poem is short and the following two tasks can be offered to the student group: gap filling and discussion based on a variety of questions.

Gap filling and checking

- Choose the most appropriate word from the box to fill each gap.
Explain your choice. Then listen to the poem and check.

1. chaps, boys, men, lads
2. just, fair, bloody, good
3. battle, war, cause, struggle
4. comrades, pals, companions, chums
5. glorious, honourable, distinguished, great
6. courted, overcome, seen, challenged
7. friends, fellows, men, boys
8. eyes, pals, legs, guns
9. gone, stone, completely, all
10. lungs, head, foot, heart
11. mad, syphilitic, neurotic, away
12. served, fought, been, enlisted

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'They' by Siegfried Sassoon

The Bishop tells us: 'When the (1)_____ come back
'They will not be the same; for they'll have fought
'In a (2)_____ (3)_____: they lead the last attack
'On Anti-Christ; their (4)_____ blood has bought
'New right to breed a/an (5)_____ race,
'They have (6)_____ Death and dared him face to face.'

'We're none of us the same!' the (7)_____ reply.
'For George lost both his (8) _____; and Bill's (9)_____ blind;
'Poor Jim's shot through the (10)_____ and like to die;
'And Bert's gone (11)_____: you'll not find
'A chap who's (12)_____ that hasn't found some change.
' And the Bishop said: 'The ways of God are strange!'

Discussion.

Answer the questions, try to provide extended views.

- Which war does it refer to? Why?
- Why does the poem fall into two parts?
- Why "They"? (not "We")
- Is Bishop patronizing the soldiers? How?
- Do both Bishop and boys agree that the war will change men?

How do their views of the change differ?

- Sometimes soldiers are described as "cannon fodder". Why? Do you agree with the definition?
- Whose point of view does it reflect?
- What is author's attitude to religion, the ordinary soldier, war and the establishment? How about yours?

The poems like this one may represent some intellectual challenge but they develop students' capacity of comprehension and analysis. They also help to build empathy and go deep into their memory.

Now to novels. *The Short-Timers* by Gustav Hasford is a good choice to reach the above goals. It is a semi-autobiographical novel by U.S. Marine Corps veteran Gustav Hasford. It depicts his experience in the Vietnam War. *The Short-Timers* was later adapted into the film Full Metal Jacket (1987). The narration is fine, real and terrifying. It marks a real advance in Vietnam war literature. The novel falls into three big parts. Part 1: *The Spirit of the Bayonet*, Part 2: *Body Count* and Part 3: *Grunts*. These parts need dividing into smaller sections for reading in and out of class and subsequent discussing and analyses, which is a challenging but interesting task for the teacher of English. All three parts provide thematic vocabulary on a particular subject - an area of military life and war. The book raises a number of important issues for debate such as hypocrisy of military propaganda (the main character Joker is a war correspondent for the marines and tells his story without sentiment, self-justification, or apology), the system of recruit training which crushes boys' spirits and then rebuilds them as brutal killers so called "grunts". The second and the third parts feature to wartime atrocities in the Vietnam War, fellowship and difficult choices to be made in the name of it.

How does the book work? It enables students penetrate the imagined worlds of fiction and build emotional empathy. It develops their ability to take another person's point of view while picturing themselves living as the characters do. This infallibly makes them contemplate deep over reality. And as a result acquire quality English on the way.

But again the teacher should facilitate the process with introduction into the topic of Vietnam War and provide some worksheets or any other supplementary material.

The worksheet (example is provided in application) is split into sections such as vocabulary work, grammar work, translation task, speaking and writing practice. The first section aims at introducing students into the variety of military

vocabulary formal as well as informal. The grammar section is related to the current grammar material under study so the teacher can choose appropriate illustrative examples right from the text. The translation section offers an extract from the novel "Farewell to arms" by E. Hemingway and could be additionally used as a situation for discussion. The reading and speaking section contain plenty of questions, namely, knowledge, comprehension, application, analysis, synthesis and evaluation ones.

The kind of work with this novel generates creativity and personal self-expression not only on the part of student group but also on the part of teacher. In conclusion, it should be said that literature supplement could become a good addition to our textbooks.

References

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