



# BUILDING

INSTITUTE TEACHES ENGLISH





# BRIDGES

BUT ALSO UNDERSTANDING



STORY BY CLIFFORD KYLE JONES

The Defense Language Institute English Language Center takes in service members from all over the world to teach them English, but it does much more than provide language skills — it builds partnerships. More than 120 countries are able to send students to train at the DLIELC’s English programs at Lackland Air Force Base in San Antonio, Texas.

The programs are broken into three broad categories — general English, which gives people with no or limited English skills a basic grasp of the language; specialized English, which is intended to prepare students who already have intermediate English skills for highly specific or technical training at follow-on sites; and instructor development, which allows foreign English language instructors to sharpen their skills training service members in their home countries.

But students aren’t just learning how to work with American English; they’re learning how to work with Americans.

“One of our primary tasks is to do acculturation — to help the students to understand what it’s like to work with Americans, what American culture is like, what the U.S. military culture is like,” said Air Force Col. Howard G. Jones III, the DLIELC commander. “So as they progress from here at Lackland Air Force Base to Fort Sill [Okla.], for example, or Naval Air Station Pensacola [Fla.], or Columbus Air Force Base [Miss.] for whatever training they’ve got, they know what it’s like to work with the U.S. military.”

And working with the U.S. military, particularly its NCOs, is something that members of foreign militaries are eager to do.

“We get hundreds of NCOs from around the world, and as most of the United States military realize, the meaning of being an NCO in foreign services is different than it is in the United States military services,” Jones said. “They’re here mostly, in my opinion, because they want to learn what it’s like to be a professional along the lines of an American military service member.”



Photo by Clifford Kyle Jones

**“I’ve never seen such military discipline as I saw here, and it’s really impressive.”**

— Nataliya Nenova Lazarova, shown above in one of her classes, is a staff sergeant in the Bulgarian army and a student in the DLIELC’s Basic American Language Instructor Course, which instructs foreign students how to teach American English.

## OTHER FUNCTIONS OF THE DLIELC

● **MOBILE TRAINING TEAMS:** In addition to the nearly 1,200 students at the Defense Language Institute English Language Center at Lackland Air Force Base in San Antonio, Texas, the institute trains the United States' partners in countries around the world with the DLIELC's mobile training teams. The MTTs consist of about three instructors from the DLIELC, and they typically spend three to six months overseas on assignment. "If I had to say what really attaches me to this place emotionally more than anything, it's those overseas assignments," said Robert Smith, a supervisor for the institute's specialized English branch who has been with the DLIELC about 17 years and spent half of that on overseas assignments. "I mean you get to see the world, it's just amazing. Plus, you go some place and you make a contribution. You can measure the things you've done and be proud of them over a six-month span."



Photo by Clifford Kyle Jones

A case at the Defense Language Institute English Language Center displays currency from around the world donated by DLIELC students.

● **ECHO COMPANY:** One of the DLIELC's roles is to prepare recruits with limited English skills for U.S. Army Basic Combat Training. The E Company students are grouped together, although the American English curriculum they receive is identical to foreign students. "I call it a cornerstone of our program," said Air Force Col. Howard G. Jones III,

the DLIELC's commander. "The Echo Company program has been here at the English Language Center for many, many years. Graduates succeed very well in BCT and go on to AIT and continue their Army careers very successfully. I think that's a great tool that the Army has in its toolbox and produces high quality Soldiers."

Nataliya Nenova Lazarova, a staff sergeant in the Bulgarian army, is a student in the Basic American Language Instructor Course, the first level of instructor development at the DLIELC. She is part of a mechanized brigade in Bulgaria that frequently deploys as part of multinational missions. Lazarova, who has a bachelor's degree in English from a Bulgarian university and has almost completed her master's degree in English, is learning how to teach American English to other members of her brigade. But she'll be taking back a lot more than improved language skills. Lazarova says she will take back a new respect for U.S. military discipline.

"I've never seen such military discipline as I saw here, and it's really impressive," she said. She's learned that "discipline in the military is the most important thing. If there is no discipline, you couldn't rely on a soldier next to you in a battle or in a mission. If there is no discipline, there are no results. If there is no discipline, there is no career. And if there is no discipline, there is — nothing."

She said the U.S. standard is much different than her native country's, and even though her interaction with U.S. NCOs has been limited, she has a profound respect for the American military because of what she has seen during her time at the DLIELC program.

"I saw most [U.S. Soldiers] when I was going to lunch or dinner. I saw how strict they are; how quick they listen to commands; how quick they fall in; how quick they react; how, if they receive instructions, they keep silent immediately and they perform it immediately," she said. "I think all those things that I said have one explanation: great discipline. Maybe that's why ... American troops all over the world, wherever they have any kinds of representatives, they do the best."

### IN THE CLASSROOM

In some ways, that same military discipline is what sets instruction apart at the DLIELC. Lazarova has been in the Bulgarian army for 11 years and has worked as an English instructor in Bulgaria. She

considers herself a responsible person, and now, as a student at the DLIELC, has even more appreciation for discipline.

"I really like their way," she said, "The way that they build your responsibilities on the next stage — evaluation, performance, and, if there is need, a punishment."

Steve Howard, a supervisor in the DLIELC's Instructor Development Branch, said the discipline required of the institute's students and instructors is one of the reasons English education at the DLIELC is unparalleled anywhere in the world.

"Being a military institute and a government organization, there are a lot of rules and regulations that we have to abide by, which you don't [have] overseas," Howard said. "I like having that structured environment here. It's not sort of 'make it up as you go,' as many overseas programs are. We have tried-and-true methods and regulations to support" the curriculum.

After four years enlisted in the Air Force, Howard finished his master's degree in public administration and, on the advice of one of his professors, began

teaching English as a second language. Over a total of more than 10 years, he did two stints in Saudi Arabia with private organizations teaching English to members of that country's navy and air force. During his stays in Saudi Arabia, he used the American Language Course, which was developed by the DLIELC and serves as its primary course material.

## IMMERSED IN ENGLISH

Instruction at the DLIELC is different than most ESL programs. For one, it's intensive. Students spend their mornings and afternoons in class, and much of their evenings in the institute's learning center, which has numerous resources intended to supplement the DLIELC's in-class instruction. Depending on the course, classes can take weeks or months. There are no long breaks for the summer or the holidays, and virtually every week of the year, at least one new class will start and at least one other will graduate. But it's not just the amount of time dedicated to instruction that makes it so intensive.

"English is spoken from day one," Jones said. "So whether students have no proficiency or they arrive with some proficiency, they're exposed to English all the time in an academic setting. And it's their duty — from the time they start class in the morning at 7:30 until they're done in the mid-afternoon and then they go to the learning center or the library to continue those studies — they have English, learning English, as their primary duty. That environment is a lot different from a university setting, for example, where English is an added task or additional kind of study that they might do to boost their proficiency."

All instruction takes place in English, not only because it's the most effective way to learn but also because it would be nearly impossible to include instruction in each of the students' native languages. At any given time, the DLIELC has nearly 1,200 students in its classes. Each class has only six to eight students, but those eight students very well might be from eight countries.

"Here you cannot resort to a second language in order to teach, say, a grammar point or a word or a concept, because all of the students are from so many different countries," Howard said "Overseas in Saudi Arabia, I could resort to Arabic to get across a grammar point or a word.

**“One of my first assignments was to pick a book. So I picked a book about PTSD, post-traumatic stress disorder. This book gave me a lot of information about the American Soldier, because in the media, in our media, it’s manipulated. In my country, or in the Middle East, they always see the American Soldier as an invader to some extent. But I know — even before reading this book, but this book fossilized this in my mind — that the American Soldier is just a human being like us. He has orders to do, and he has problems to face. ... We’re just human beings in the end, and we’re soldiers.”**

— Imad K. Othman, shown at right in one of his classes, is a master sergeant in Lebanon's army and a student in the DLIELC's Basic American Language Instructor Course.

"For example, the word 'proud,'" Howard said. "You try as you might to explain what 'proud' means: OK, when you graduate you're father will feel really ... and they all say 'happy.' You're like, well, it's kind of like 'happy,' but it's a little more. And so I just gave up, and said 'fachour,' which is 'proud.' And they say, 'Oh, OK, yes, my father will feel "proud."' Teaching overseas, you can do things like that; here you just can't. So it really is a struggle sometimes, but you really get to develop your skills in how to get things across to your students in English."

Lazarova also wondered how instruction would work without being able to resort to her native Bulgarian. Because Lazarova knew that the DLIELC instructors teaching her unit American English while she is studying in San Antonio wouldn't know Bulgarian, she had a hard time understanding how the language skills would be imparted.

"I was puzzled, because when I worked in high school and even at the university, I could ask for an explanation

in Bulgarian if I didn't understand something," she said.

Lazarova says she has tried to use every opportunity to expand her linguistic and cultural knowledge, going so far as to squeeze in some learning while her instructors are evaluating her. In this case, while she was taking the Oral Proficiency Interview, which tests a student's oral skills in a conversation with two raters and which Basic American Language Instructor Course students take as part of their instruction, Lazarova asked the raters about the advantages and methods of the DLIELC's English-only instruction and how they teach students abroad when the instructors are not familiar with the students' language.

"Now I realize that the better way is not to do that explanation in Bulgarian, to try to keep it in English all the time," she said. "I really appreciated their opinion because they're so experienced, they have traveled abroad many times and taught different kinds of people all over the world — for example, in Korea, the Mideast, even Afghanistan."



Photo by Clifford Kyle Jones

Discussions with her raters and other instructors are not the only way Lazarova has supplemented her education. She has been particularly interested in using her time in the United States to develop a feel for the culture and how the language is used in the States idiomatically, beyond the rules of American English. As part of their education, many of the students at the DLIELC take part in field trips throughout the United States.

Lazarova visited Washington, D.C., in the first month of her six-month course. And though she had studied American culture and history and knew, for instance, the number of senators and representatives in Congress and how they are elected, she said it was a completely different experience to watch the legislative process in person at the Capitol. Even her graduate work didn't prepare her for everything she would need to know in the United States.

"I have studied British and American culture. ... But, you know, they give me a book [and say] 'read the book.' OK, I read it, but you know it's different to see

it and to see how actually people behave," Lazarova said. "And why do you think I had problems with American cuisine and American food? The first time I saw a menu, I couldn't understand anything. That's something you have to be in the real environment" to learn.

### NEW PERSPECTIVES

Aside from dining out, Lazarova said she hasn't had any "culture shocks" during her visit to America; in fact, her most surprising cultural experience has been realizing how friendly everyone in San Antonio is.

For another student in one of the institute's BALIC classes, Imad K. Othman, a master sergeant in Lebanon's army, it was San Antonio's lack of skyscrapers that was a little jarring. American sights and culture are common in Lebanese media, Othman said, but the view can be limited.

"You're always seeing New York, skyscrapers; Los Angeles, or Malibu, so it was shocking here when I first landed in San Antonio," he said. "I don't see any

skyscrapers. Is that America?"

Through the institute's tours and personal trips, Othman has now visited New York City, in addition to Washington, D.C., and several other U.S. cities.

"New York City is like, wow, this is amazing! Skyscrapers everywhere, a lot of crowds, and dealing with people is very different. Here [in San Antonio], you can find someone to say, 'Hi, how you doing?' But up there, they're always in a rush. Here in the United States, it's a massive country, so you find lots of diversity. I think that's one of the best things you can find in a country this big. It's united — it's called the United States — but every single state is different."

San Antonio is home to one amenity of particular interest to Othman. In addition to his army duties, the 6-foot-7 Othman plays basketball on the Lebanese national team. "The first thing I did here was go to see the San Antonio Spurs," he said. "My teammates were jealous. I've

**continues on page 41 ►**