

Speaking Their Language: Applying Military Contexts to Teach English Grammar and Vocabulary to Military Academy Trainees

Hablando su idioma: Aplicación de contextos militares para enseñar gramática y vocabulario del inglés a aspirantes de academia militar

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Abstract

The use of military contexts in teaching English as a foreign language remains underexplored in Latin American ESP research, particularly within the Ecuadorian military context. In these contexts, students often demonstrate limited engagement when teachers rely on general English textbooks and instructional methods that are not connected to their professional reality. This study addressed this gap by examining how the integration of military contexts supports the learning of English grammar and vocabulary. The participants were trainees preparing for admission to ESFORSE, the Ecuadorian training academy for enlisted soldiers and technical specialists. A qualitative instrumental case study was conducted with fifteen trainees at a military academy. The intervention had four thematic blocks based on military scenarios: reporting to the unit, giving orders at a checkpoint, inspecting tactical equipment, and carrying out a rescue mission. Data were collected through a field diary and an anonymous survey consisting of Likert-scale and open-ended questions. The findings revealed that the instructional approach generated positive perceptions among the trainees by connecting language content with their future professional environment. The findings suggest that integrating military contexts into English instruction can support grammar and vocabulary learning among military trainees.

Keywords: English for specific purposes; military contexts; English grammar; English vocabulary; contextualized learning.

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Resumen

El uso de contextos militares en la enseñanza del inglés como lengua extranjera sigue siendo poco explorado en la investigación latinoamericana sobre inglés con fines específicos (ESP), particularmente dentro del contexto militar ecuatoriano. En estos contextos, los estudiantes suelen demostrar un compromiso limitado cuando los docentes se apoyan en libros de texto de inglés general y métodos de instrucción que no se conectan con su realidad profesional. Este estudio abordó esta brecha al examinar cómo la integración de contextos militares apoya el aprendizaje de gramática y vocabulario del inglés. Los participantes fueron aspirantes que se preparaban para el ingreso a ESFORSE, la academia ecuatoriana de formación para soldados alistados y especialistas técnicos. Se realizó un estudio de caso instrumental cualitativo con quince aspirantes en una academia militar. La intervención tuvo cuatro bloques temáticos basados en escenarios militares: presentarse a la unidad, dar órdenes en un puesto de control, inspeccionar equipo táctico y llevar a cabo una misión de rescate. Los datos se recolectaron mediante un diario de campo y una encuesta anónima compuesta por preguntas de escala Likert y preguntas abiertas. Los hallazgos revelaron que el enfoque instruccional generó percepciones positivas entre los aspirantes al conectar el contenido lingüístico con su futuro entorno profesional. Los hallazgos sugieren que la integración de contextos militares en la enseñanza del inglés puede apoyar el aprendizaje de gramática y vocabulario entre aprendices militares.

Palabras clave: Inglés con fines específicos; contextos militares; gramática inglesa; vocabulario inglés; aprendizaje contextualizado.

Introduction

A military academy prepares high school graduates to successfully complete examinations and selection stages required for admission to ESFORSE, the Ecuadorian training academy for enlisted soldiers and technical specialists. In these academies, students are referred to as trainees. In addition to academic preparation, trainees receive military instruction, psychology, and other subjects designed to facilitate their gradual adaptation to military life.

Many trainees show limited interest in learning English when instruction relies on lengthy texts, repetitive vocabulary memorization, mechanical drills, or teacher-centered lectures with minimal student interaction. These approaches frequently rely on general English textbooks that emphasize everyday topics rather than military contexts, making it difficult for learners to establish meaningful connections between classroom content and their professional goals. Khalabuzar (2023), found that traditional materials often overlook the specific communication needs of military personnel. Zambrano and Velez (2025), observed that Ecuadorian applicants show little engagement when instruction is not related to their future careers. As a result, applicants may acquire grammar and vocabulary only superficially, without developing the ability to apply them effectively in authentic communicative situations.

Consequently, the military academy provides an appropriate environment for fostering interest in English among trainees, since learning it in this context not only gives them a competitive advantage over other candidates, but also helps them see the language as a key tool for their future performance within the military institution.

This study aimed to address this disconnect by adopting an English for Specific Purposes (ESP) approach with a focus on military contexts. This approach views language as a professional communication tool rather than merely an academic subject (Purba et al., 2023).

Incorporating authentic military scenarios including reporting to the military unit, checkpoint procedures, tactical equipment inspections, and rescue missions connects language instruction directly to authentic military practice. Drach et al. (2024), demonstrated how future security sector specialists benefit from contextualized vocabulary instruction embedded in professionally relevant tasks. Sack et al. (2021), found that a cumulative learning approach at the United States Military Academy helped cadets retain specialized terminology more effectively. Similarly, Wen-hui et al. (2020), reported that non-commissioned officers in Asia particularly valued simulations and role plays, as these activities mirrored the language demands of their work. Together, these studies suggest that using authentic materials not only facilitates vocabulary acquisition but also increases learner motivation.

Despite growing interest in ESP within military contexts, important gaps remain in the literature. Most existing studies have been conducted in North American (Sack et al., 2021), European (Khalabuzar, 2023), or Asian settings (Wen-hui et al., 2020), where military training structures and language policies differ from those in Latin America. Furthermore, much of the research to date has focused on listening and speaking skills or on overall course design, with less attention given to how military contexts might specifically support the learning of grammar and vocabulary. Zambrano and Velez (2025), explicitly call for more research in this area, noting that their own study pointed to the need for stronger evidence on how contextualized materials influence grammatical development. Despite these advances, little is known about how Ecuadorian military trainees perceive this instructional approach or the challenges they experience while learning English through military contexts.

The aim of this study was to analyze how using military contexts helps students learn English grammar and vocabulary in oral production. Therefore, the study adopted a qualitative instrumental case study design involving the implementation of a military-specific ESP module. Two data collection instruments were used: a field diary and an anonymous survey. The study analyzed the results of an ESP module specifically designed for applicants to the armed forces, implemented with fifteen applicants at the Espremil Tiwintza Military Academy in Amaguaña, Quito, Ecuador.

This instructional design was developed to answer the following research questions: (1) How do trainees perceive the use of military contexts for learning English? (2) What difficulties do they face, and what factors facilitate their learning? (3) What changes in grammar and vocabulary learning, and in oral participation, can be observed during the implementation?

Theoretical framework

This study was grounded in Ausubel's (1968), theory of meaningful learning and Lave and Wenger's (1991), Situated Learning Theory. Ausubel's theory proposes that learning becomes more meaningful when new information is connected to learners' existing knowledge. In the present context, linking English grammar and vocabulary to familiar military situations can facilitate the integration of new language into learners' existing knowledge structures.

Lave and Wenger's (1991), Situated Learning Theory emphasizes that learning develops through active participation in authentic social practices. From this perspective, simulations and role plays based on military scenarios provide opportunities for learners to use English within contexts that reflect their future professional environment. Such activities can make language learning more relevant by connecting classroom practices with real-world communication demands. This perspective is consistent with findings reported by Sack et al. (2021), which highlight the value of contextualized learning for the development of specialized military language.

Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) also provides a relevant framework for this study because it promotes language learning through meaningful interaction and the completion of purposeful tasks. TBLT is grounded in cognitive and interactionist perspectives of second language acquisition, emphasizing opportunities for learners to use language to achieve communicative goals (Ellis et al., 2020; Granena & Yilmaz, 2021). In military contexts, tasks such as simulations, role plays, and problem-solving activities can provide learners with opportunities to use grammar and vocabulary while completing realistic communicative purposes. This approach is particularly relevant to the present study because the instructional activities required trainees to use English to complete military-related tasks, such as giving orders, inspecting equipment, and carrying out a rescue mission.

Literature Review

Research on Military English has increasingly emphasized the importance of connecting language instruction with learners' professional needs and future communicative situations. English for Specific Purposes (ESP) courses for military personnel should therefore consider the characteristics of learners, their communicative needs, and the situations in which they are expected to use the language (Khalabuzar, 2023; Purba et al., 2023). Previous research has examined different aspects of Military English instruction; however, the available evidence is not equally developed across all areas addressed in the present study. The following review is therefore organized according to the three research questions: perceptions of military contexts for learning English, difficulties and facilitating factors, and grammar and vocabulary learning and oral participation.

Perceptions about the use of military contexts for learning English

Previous studies suggest that professionally relevant contexts can positively influence military learners' attitudes toward English. Wen-hui et al. (2020), found that non-commissioned officers valued simulations and role play because these activities reflected the language demands of their professional work. Similarly, Zambrano and Vélez (2025), in their study of military academy trainees in Ecuador, reported that connecting English instruction with the military environment can increase learners' interest by making the language more relevant to their professional goals. These studies suggest that the perceived usefulness and authenticity of learning activities may influence how military learners respond to English instruction.

Research on ESP course design also supports the importance of considering learners' expectations and professional needs. Silva and Damião (2023), in their study of an online ESP course for Brazilian Army personnel, highlighted the importance of needs analyses that take learners' goals and expectations into account. Likewise, Khalabuzar (2023), argued that Military English courses should respond to the specific communicative requirements and characteristics of military students. Together, these studies indicate that relevance to future professional situations is an important consideration in the design of Military English instruction.

However, most of these studies have focused on course design, professional personnel, or general perceptions of ESP instruction. Less is known about how Ecuadorian military trainees, particularly those preparing for admission to a military institution, perceive the use of military scenarios as a context for learning English. This represents a gap that the present study addresses by exploring participants' preferences, attitudes, and perceptions of the future usefulness of English learned through military contexts.

Difficulties and factors that facilitate learning

Research on Military English has identified the need to consider both the challenges learners experience and the instructional factors that support their learning. Purba et al. (2023) emphasized that ESP instruction should be based on learners' real communicative needs and should provide opportunities to use language for meaningful purposes. Similarly, Aldosari (2025), found that military learners use different learning strategies, including collaborative learning, and highlighted the value of interactive approaches rather than relying exclusively on written repetition.

Several studies have also examined factors that can facilitate learning in professionally relevant contexts. Drach et al. (2024), demonstrated that future security sector specialists benefited from vocabulary instruction embedded in professionally relevant tasks. Patiño Yáñez (2024), identified strategies such as practical applications related to military tasks, games, recognition of

achievements, and clear learning goals as potentially useful for increasing motivation and engagement among military learners. Zambrano and Vélez (2025), also suggested that contextualized materials can help learners establish meaningful connections between language content and their prior knowledge of the military environment.

Despite these contributions, there is limited research specifically examining the difficulties experienced by learners during the implementation of military-contextualized English lessons. Existing studies provide information about instructional strategies and motivation, but fewer studies analyze particular challenges, such as difficulties related to pronunciation, grammatical structures, or nervousness when speaking, together with the factors that help learners overcome them. There is also limited qualitative evidence from Ecuadorian military trainees regarding how authentic materials, collaborative activities, or familiar military contexts influence their learning experience. These areas therefore remain important gaps in the literature.

Grammar and vocabulary learning, and oral participation

Previous research supports the use of contextualized and professionally relevant activities for developing specialized vocabulary. Sack et al. (2021), found that a cumulative learning approach at the United States Military Academy supported cadets' retention of specialized terminology. Similarly, Drach et al. (2024), reported benefits from embedding vocabulary instruction in tasks related to the professional environment of future security specialists. These findings suggest that vocabulary may be more easily retained when learners encounter and use it within meaningful situations rather than as isolated items.

Research has also highlighted the importance of authentic tasks and repeated language use. Wen-hui et al. (2020), found that military personnel valued simulations and role plays that reflected the communicative demands of their work, while Aldosari (2025), identified interactive and collaborative approaches as relevant learning strategies among military students. Such activities provide opportunities for learners to practice language in interaction and may support oral participation by giving them a clear communicative purpose.

Evidence regarding grammar learning in military contexts, however, is more limited. Zambrano and Vélez (2025), noted the need for stronger evidence on how contextualized materials influence grammatical development. Existing research has paid greater attention to specialized vocabulary, communication skills, or overall ESP course design than to the learning of specific grammatical structures through military scenarios. This is particularly evident in Latin American research, where studies have addressed areas such as Aeronautical English and radiotelephony (Santos et al., 2018) or ESP material design for naval students (Castillo Payares, 2022), rather than the contextualized teaching of grammar.

A further gap concerns changes in oral participation during military-contextualized instruction. Although simulations, role plays, and collaborative activities have been recognized as useful ways of reflecting authentic communication (Wen-hui et al., 2020), there is limited qualitative evidence showing how participation changes over the course of an intervention, particularly among beginning-level trainees in Ecuador. Therefore, further research is needed to examine how military contexts may support the learning of grammar and vocabulary while also encouraging learners to participate orally.

Overall, the literature indicates that professionally relevant and authentic contexts can increase the relevance of English instruction and support specialized vocabulary learning. However, important gaps remain regarding Ecuadorian military trainees' perceptions, the specific difficulties they experience and the factors that facilitate their learning, as well as the development of grammar and changes in oral participation. The present study addresses these gaps by examining the implementation of a military-specific ESP module with trainees preparing for admission to ESFORSE.

Methodology

The present study adopted a qualitative instrumental case study design (Stake, 1995). Its primary aim was to analyze how learning English grammar and vocabulary through military contexts in an EFL course supported the learning process.

Participants

The study was conducted at the Esprefmil Tiwintza Military Academy located in the parish of Amaguaña, in the city of Quito, Ecuador. The institution offers specialized training programs for trainees seeking admission to different military and police academies. For the purposes of this study, only applicants to ESFORSE were selected, as they represented the target population. The sample consisted of 15 students, aged between 17 and 19 years old. None of the participants had previously received formal instruction in Military English.

The selection of participants was made considering the following criteria: (a) being a trainee preparing for admission to ESFORSE, (b) having availability to participate in the four weeks of the study, and (c) not having previously taken military English classes. This sampling strategy ensured a homogeneous group that shared similar characteristics and learning objectives.

Course planning

Within the framework of an instrumental case study, a specific group of applicants was observed in their natural classroom environment. Unlike other case study designs, the group was not the central object of the investigation; rather, it served to explore, through the students' lived experience, how military contexts can support English language learning. The intervention transformed the classroom into a simulated military environment in which applicants experienced each session as though they were participating in authentic military situations.

The intervention lasted four weeks, with one week allocated to each thematic block. Each session was two hours long and was divided into three phases: presentation phase, practice phase with pair and group work, and simulation activity that enabled participants to apply the target grammar and vocabulary in a military scenario. This structure was aligned with the academy's training schedule, which allocates extended time blocks for core subjects to prepare participants for the rigorous ESFORSE admission process. The lessons were organized into four thematic blocks:

First block: reporting to the military unit

During this block, participants participated in a simulated military formation, in which applicants had to report to their superior officer. To do this, they learned to use the verb *to be* and to ask and answer personal questions such as *What is your name?* and *What is your rank?* The vocabulary covered included military ranks and combat units (infantry, cavalry, etc.).

Second block: orders at the checkpoint

During this block, instruction was organized around a simulated military checkpoint. Applicants learned to give and receive orders using the affirmative imperative (*Stop!*, *Open the door!*, *Show your ID*, *Get out of the vehicle*) and the negative imperative (*Don't move!*).

Third block: tactical equipment inspection

In this block, participants simulated the inspection of a unit's military gear. They practiced describing the presence and location of military equipment using *there is* and *there are* in affirmative, negative, and interrogative forms (*There is a rifle on the table*, *There aren't any grenades*, *Is there a radio?*). The vocabulary included *weapon*, *rifle*, *radio*, *map*, *compass*, *helmet*, *uniform*, *backpack*, *magazine*, and *grenade*.

Fourth block: rescue mission.

This block integrated all the content from the previous blocks. A simulated rescue mission was designed in which participants, working in teams, had to apply the vocabulary and grammar they had learned to complete the task. The main grammatical structures were the simple present (*I move, he moves, the enemy advances*) and the third person singular, while the vocabulary included *move, advance, secure, clear, enemy, forest, hill, building, village, and patrol*. To enhance motivation, the team that completed the mission most accurately within the shortest time received a small prize.

Throughout the intervention, the classroom continued to function as a simulated military environment, which allowed for direct observation of the lessons and documentation of applicants' reactions, difficulties, and progress.

Data collection instruments

Two instruments were used to collect data: a field diary and an anonymous survey for applicants.

Field diary

The course instructor used the field diary to write down observations after each class session. It included applicants' reactions, participation levels, and learning difficulties observed during class activities.

Student survey

The survey was administered in Spanish during the final instructional session. It contained two sections, the first of which featured five items using a five-point Likert scale that aimed to measure participants' opinions about their general experience with the military-themed lessons. The second section presented ten open-ended questions that explored applicants' preferences, difficulties, helpful factors, perceived progress, and suggestions for improvement. The survey was developed specifically for this study based on the research questions and the literature reviewed. It was written in Spanish so that all participants could understand it easily. Before its administration, all items were reviewed to ensure clarity, content relevance, and alignment with the research objectives.

Data analysis and coding procedure

The qualitative data from the field diary and the open-ended responses were transcribed and analyzed using thematic analysis. The coding process had three phases: open coding to find recurring ideas, axial coding to group the codes into broader categories, and thematic refinement to finalize the categories. This analytical process resulted in three overarching themes: perceptions about using military contexts, difficulties and factors that helped learning, and changes observed in grammar and vocabulary learning.

Results

This section presents the findings regarding the use of military contexts to support English grammar and vocabulary learning among trainees at an Ecuadorian military academy. The findings are organized around the three research questions.

Perceptions about using military contexts

Most participants had a positive reaction to the method. In the survey, 12 out of 15 participants strongly agreed that they liked learning English with military topics, whereas none expressed disagreement.

Most liked activities

The rescue mission was the favorite activity for eight participants. Applicants valued this activity because it integrated content from previous instructional blocks while promoting teamwork under realistic conditions.

As one participant commented, *“The rescue mission was the one I liked the most because we had to use everything we learned in the previous blocks. Working as a team and in a real situation made me feel English was fun”* (A1).

The checkpoint was preferred by four participants, who liked how realistic the imperative orders were.

“I prefer the checkpoint because I felt like a real soldier giving orders like ‘Stop!’ and ‘Open the door!’. It was a very realistic experience, and it motivated me to participate without fear.” (A2)

The tactical equipment inspection was mentioned by three participants, who liked using real objects.

“The tactical equipment inspection was the best for me because we could touch real objects like helmets and radios. That made the vocabulary stick in my head much more easily than just repeating words from a book” (A3).

These findings were further supported by classroom observations documented in the field diary. It notes that using real objects increased attention and that the chance to win a prize at the end of the rescue mission increased voluntary participation and spontaneous use of English.

Perception of future usefulness

Fourteen participants considered the knowledge acquired to be relevant to their future military careers. They mentioned international operations, reading manuals, and having a competitive advantage.

“I want to be a soldier, and I know that later I will need English to communicate with soldiers from other countries. These classes helped me start and lose my fear of the language, because now I know I can learn if I connect it with what I like” (A2).

“It will help me stand out among other participants. Not all participants know military English, and having this base gives me an advantage when I apply to ESFORSE” (A15).

Changes in attitude

The field diary kept by the course instructor documented a gradual shift in participants' attitudes toward learning English. Several participants who started the sessions saying they found English “boring” or “pointless” finished the intervention with a completely different view.

“I never liked English before because I saw it as boring and pointless. But with military topics, my perspective changed; now I feel it is a useful tool for my career” (A1).

The method's effectiveness was also seen when another aspirant compared this experience to his previous classes.

“With the traditional textbook I barely learned anything. But studying these four blocks with military topics, I learned much more than in all of last year. The difference is that English had a real purpose, and that made me stay focused” (A2).

Difficulties and factors that helped learning

Difficulties

Pronunciation emerged as the most frequently reported challenge (9 participants). The teacher's journal describes it as "the most frequent and persistent obstacle".

"Pronunciation was what I struggled with the most, especially words like 'equipment' or 'magazine'. In English, letters don't sound like they do in Spanish, and that made me feel insecure when speaking" (A1).

Initial nervousness was mentioned by five participants. The journal notes that in the first sessions, several participants "hesitated before speaking" or "stayed silent".

"At first, I was afraid of making mistakes when speaking, so I preferred to stay quiet. That nervousness was my biggest difficulty, but seeing that no one made fun of me, I slowly lost my fear" (A11).

The third person singular was identified as the '-s' ending in verbs such as 'moves' and 'advances' by two participants.

"The third person singular was hard for me, like 'he moves' or 'the enemy advances'. I forgot to add the 's' to the verb because we don't do that in Spanish" (A4).

The journal confirms that the error "came back several times" despite immediate correction and visual examples on the board.

Factors that helped learning.

The use of authentic military equipment emerged as the most frequently identified facilitating factor (7 participants). The journal notes that participants "pointed at, touched, and repeated the vocabulary with less resistance".

"Working with real objects helped me memorize vocabulary without effort. Seeing and touching a radio or a helmet while saying its name in English was very effective" (A13).

Short imperative orders were highlighted by six participants. The journal notes that participants who had not spoken at the beginning "repeated the orders without problems".

"The imperative orders were very easy for me because they are short and direct sentences. Saying 'Stop' is just as easy in English as in Spanish because it's a short expression." (A04) Collaborative pair work was identified by four participants as an important factor supporting oral partici-

pation. The journal indicates that this strategy “reduced the fear of making mistakes and allowed practice without pressure”.

“I found the personal introduction easy because we used the verb ‘to be’, which I had seen before. Also, we practiced in pairs, and that took away the pressure of speaking alone in front of everyone” (A2).

Changes observed in grammar and vocabulary learning

Vocabulary learning

Participants demonstrated successful recall of specialized military vocabulary, particularly expressions associated with the simulated activities, mentioning phrases like “Stop! Open the door!”, “Show your ID”, “There is a rifle on the table” and “Enemy ahead.” Contextual association was instrumental in their ability to recall.

“I remember ‘Enemy ahead’ because I shouted it several times during the rescue mission to warn my team. It was a phrase we used in a moment of tension, and that’s why I don’t forget it” (A1).

Twelve participants identified vocabulary as the easiest aspect, because of similarity to Spanish (radio, uniform, map) and because of the use of real objects.

“The easiest part was vocabulary, especially nouns. Since I already knew those objects from my daily life at military school, I just had to learn the English label” (A9).

Grammar learning

The imperative emerged as the grammatical structure that participants perceived as the easiest to acquire.

“The imperative orders were the easiest. You don’t have to think about subjects or verb tenses, just the action. That made me feel confident from the very beginning” (A7).

The structure there is/there are, although confusing at first, was understood by the end of the block.

“I got a bit confused about the difference between ‘there is’ and ‘there are’. At first I used ‘there is’ for everything, but after several examples I understood that it depends on whether it is singular or plural” (A3).

Some participants used the third person singular correctly. As one aspirant stated, “*The enemy advances’ was a phrase we used in the rescue mission to describe what was happening. I liked this combination with an action verb*” (A10).

Change in participation over time

The field diary showed clear progress in participants’ oral production in English. In the first block, most were not very willing to speak, and some said they found the class boring. In the second block, some participants still avoided speaking. By the third block, about half of the participants were already speaking without the teacher asking them to. In the fourth block, almost all participants participated actively. The field diary also noted that participants who did not raise their hands at the beginning ended up leading the orders in the final activity.

Discussion

The findings suggest that integrating authentic military scenarios into English instruction can support grammar and vocabulary learning while increasing the perceived relevance of English among military applicants. The discussion is organized according to the three research questions, addressing the participants’ perceptions, the difficulties and factors that facilitated learning, and the changes observed in grammar, vocabulary, and oral participation.

The first research question aimed to understand how trainees perceive the use of military contexts for learning English. The results showed a predominantly positive perception of the instructional approach. Most participants valued activities such as the rescue mission, checkpoint procedures, and tactical equipment inspection because they connected English with their future military environment. This connection between new language content and prior knowledge of military practices is consistent with Ausubel’s (1968) Theory of Meaningful Learning. The findings also align with Zambrano and Vélez (2025), whose study of military academy trainees in Ecuador reported that contextualized English instruction can improve learners’ attitudes by making the language more relevant to their professional goals. The preference for simulations and teamwork, particularly during the rescue mission and checkpoint activity, is also consistent with Wen-hui et al. (2020), who found that military personnel valued role plays and simulations because they reflected the language demands of their professional contexts.

The second research question examined the difficulties trainees faced and the factors that facilitated their learning. Pronunciation and initial nervousness were the main difficulties reported. These challenges are consistent with difficulties identified in ESP contexts, where learners may require additional support when using specialized language orally (Purba et al., 2023; Aldosari,

2025). However, the use of authentic military equipment, short imperative commands, and pair work appeared to facilitate learning. Real objects allowed trainees to associate vocabulary with familiar military equipment, while pair work reduced the pressure of speaking in front of the whole class. These findings support Lave and Wenger's (1991), Situated Learning Theory, which emphasizes learning through participation in meaningful activities, and Vygotsky's (1978), view of social interaction as an important element in learning. Therefore, the combination of authentic materials and collaborative practice appeared to help reduce nervousness and encourage participation.

The third research question focused on the changes observed in grammar and vocabulary learning and in oral participation. The findings showed differences in the perceived difficulty of the grammatical structures. The imperative was considered the easiest structure because it involved short and direct commands, whereas the third person singular remained the main grammatical difficulty, particularly in forms such as *he moves* and *the enemy advances*. The field diary also documented repeated errors with the *-s* ending, which is consistent with Aldosari's (2025), observation that some grammatical features in Military English require explicit instruction and repeated practice.

Regarding vocabulary, trainees were able to recall specialized expressions such as *enemy ahead* and *show your ID*, particularly when these had been used during the simulations. The use of real objects also appeared to support vocabulary retention. This finding is consistent with Lave and Wenger's (1991), Situated Learning Theory and with previous research emphasizing the value of authentic and professionally relevant contexts for specialized vocabulary learning (Drach et al., 2024; Sack et al., 2021). In addition, the field diary showed a gradual increase in oral participation. While most participants were initially hesitant to speak, participation increased across the four blocks, and by the final activity, almost all participants were actively involved. This progression suggests that repeated exposure to familiar military contexts and opportunities to use English for a clear communicative purpose may have contributed to greater confidence and willingness to participate.

Overall, the findings indicate that military contexts provided a meaningful framework for English instruction among Ecuadorian military trainees. The positive perceptions, the easier recall of contextualized vocabulary, the gradual reduction of nervousness, and the increase in oral participation suggest that professionally relevant contexts can support both engagement and language learning. These findings are consistent with previous research emphasizing authentic tasks, specialized vocabulary, and the alignment of ESP instruction with learners' professional needs (Wen-hui et al., 2020; Drach et al., 2024; Sack et al., 2021; Zambrano & Vélez, 2025). The study also contributes evidence from Ecuadorian military trainees before their formal admission to ESFOR-SE, a population that has received limited attention in previous Military English research.

Conclusions

This study examined the influence of military contexts on the learning of English grammar and vocabulary among trainees preparing for admission to ESFORSE. Overall, the findings indicate that contextualizing English instruction within authentic military scenarios was associated with greater learner motivation, promoted active participation, and facilitated the acquisition of language structures that were directly relevant to their future professional responsibilities.

The instructional approach positively influenced trainees' attitudes toward learning English by helping them perceive the language as a practical tool for their future military careers. Authentic activities such as the rescue mission and the checkpoint were particularly valued because of their realism and direct connection to military practice. Although pronunciation and anxiety when speaking English remained the main challenges, the use of real objects, short imperative commands, and pair work reduced learners' insecurity and encouraged greater classroom participation. Gradual progress was also observed throughout the intervention. Vocabulary associated with concrete objects and authentic situations was retained more easily, while the imperative emerged as the most accessible grammatical structure. In contrast, the third-person singular remained the greatest grammatical difficulty. Classroom observations also revealed a progressive increase in spontaneous oral participation across the four instructional blocks.

Beyond these findings, this study offers three main contributions to the field of English for Specific Purposes in Latin American military contexts. First, it provides empirical evidence from a population that has received limited attention in previous research: Ecuadorian military trainees before formal admission to ESFORSE. Second, it demonstrates the pedagogical value of integrating authentic military simulations and real objects to promote vocabulary retention and meaningful language learning. Third, it supports the principles of Meaningful Learning Theory by showing that connecting new language content with learners' prior military knowledge can foster more positive attitudes toward learning English.

Overall, the findings suggest that integrating authentic military contexts into English instruction represents a promising pedagogical approach for supporting grammar and vocabulary development among Ecuadorian military trainees while increasing the perceived relevance of English for their future professional practice.

Contributions to the Latin American context

One of the most relevant contributions of this study is that it provides empirical evidence about a population that previous research has largely ignored: trainees to ESFORSE, before their formal admission. While earlier studies in the region have focused on personnel in advanced

training or active service (Santos et al., 2018; Castillo Payares, 2022), this study looks at a critical stage where attitudes toward English can define future success in selection and training processes.

Moreover, the findings directly respond to the need noted by Zambrano and Vélez (2025) and Nenko (2025), for solid research on English for specific purposes in Latin American defense contexts. The study shows that military contexts not only act as a motivating vehicle but also appear to facilitate grammar and vocabulary acquisition military contexts not only act as a motivating vehicle but also appear to support grammar and vocabulary learning by providing a more meaningful alternative to traditional approaches based on general English textbooks.

Limitations and recommendations for future research

As with any qualitative case study, several limitations must be acknowledged. The small sample size ($n = 15$) and the qualitative case study design limit the transferability of findings beyond this specific institutional context. Furthermore, because the intervention lasted only four weeks, long-term retention could not be evaluated. Since this is a qualitative study, the data were collected through surveys and direct observations, which are appropriate instruments to explore perceptions and experiences; however, objective pre- and post-tests were not included to measure language improvement quantitatively. Finally, the dual role of the teacher as both instructor and researcher may have introduced researcher bias; however, the use of anonymous surveys helped mitigate this potential limitation.

Future research could address these limitations by using mixed designs with control groups, pre- and post-intervention measurements, and longitudinal follow-ups to assess learning and retention over time. It would also be valuable to explore the use of immersive technologies, such as virtual reality and advanced gamification, to enhance military simulations, as well as to expand the sample to include participants from different institutions across Ecuador.

Based on these findings, English instructors working in military ESP contexts may consider incorporating real objects such as helmets, radios, and maps when teaching vocabulary. The use of these materials appeared to support vocabulary learning among the participants by providing multimodal and kinesthetic experiences. Therefore, future material design for this type of learner could incorporate hands-on activities that allow students to interact physically with the objects they are naming in English. This approach may enhance vocabulary acquisition by connecting new words with concrete, tangible experiences.

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