

# **FOREIGN LANGUAGE TEACHING AND LEARNING: CHALLENGE AND CHANGE**

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## **1. Introduction**

The Centre for Languages and Translation, Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM) in Penang, Malaysia offers many *languages* to meet various needs of the students of the university. In addition to Malay, the national language, and English, the second language of Malaysia, the centre offers seven other languages; Arabic, Mandarin, Thai, French, German, Spanish and Japanese, which can be, categorised as foreign languages. Although English language is no longer used as the medium of instruction in the schools, institutes of higher learning and universities in Malaysia (with exception of some courses), it has remained as the most important foreign language. This importance and its usage in many official situations have earned English language its status as the second language in Malaysia.

Initially, a reading knowledge of one or more languages is the desired aim of many educated man. In accordance to the changes and paradigm shifts in foreign language teaching methodology, especially English language, the ability to communicate in other languages became the central need. Oral comprehension and speaking became important and were followed by the audio-lingual revolution. This revolution, a pedagogical and technological revolution popularised the language laboratory and replaced vocabulary lists with dialogues and translation exercises with pattern drills. This revolution also changed the objectives from that of *preparation for reading* to the practical applications of four skills – listening, speaking, reading and writing – and made the study of culture more comprehensive and pragmatic than it had been before. This four-skill philosophy dominates foreign language teaching today. Therefore, foreign language teaching today is

directed to a more comprehensive objective – all the four skills plus culture.

## **2. Foreign Language Courses in USM**

The University graduation criteria require all students to take and pass with a minimum of a Grade C, two units of the Malay language courses and 4 units of the English language courses to meet the graduation requirements of the university. Apart from these two languages, a relatively high number of students take foreign languages to gather option units and to secure better job prospects after graduation. At present there are seven foreign languages offered at the Centre, these are:

- Arabic
- French
- German
- Japanese
- Mandarin
- Spanish
- Thai

The general aim of the foreign language courses is to expose students to learning new languages and the relevant cultures and traditions, in order to equip them with basic communicative skills – up to intermediate level (maximum of 200 hours) - for daily social discourses, work and further studies. All the foreign language syllabuses are designed to emphasize the aural-oral aspects of the language although the reading and writing skills in foreign scripts (Arabic, Japanese, Mandarin and Thai) are also incorporated. The first level course is strictly for beginners who have “zero-knowledge” of the language. Students who have some basic speaking or reading skills will be placed in higher levels after being tested by the teachers.

After finishing each language course (four levels), the students should be able to:

(1) converse with basic to intermediate skills in everyday situation (acquisition of between 1200-1500 words)

(2) read and write in elementary to intermediate level in foreign scripts (Chinese, Thai, Japanese, Arabic)

(3) write (1000 words) and translate short texts (500 words) with sufficient syntactical knowledge

(4) understand the culture, tradition and values system of the foreign language learned. Students can register any one of the seven foreign languages either as:

- core courses
- option courses
- minor programme courses

The core courses and option courses carry the maximum of 16 units in 4 levels. Students are not required to take all four levels. They can take a minimum of one paper (2 units) or all four papers, depending on individual or faculty requirements.

For the two minor programmes, i.e., Japanese language minor and Mandarin language minor, students can take the whole package of four compulsory courses (16 unit). They can also take an additional 2 option units from the option course of the minor programme (Mandarin or Japanese for Business). It is essential to note that these two programmes are purely language minor programmes, not Chinese or Japanese Studies.

### **3. Characteristics and problems of the foreign language programmes**

The tertiary education system in Malaysia has gone through many changes in the last few years. One of the major changes is the move from the four-year system for the bachelor degree into the three-year system. The implementation of this system has affected many aspects of the graduation requirement and one of them is the number of courses and the total units for a bachelor programme.

At USM, the units for a Bachelor in Arts programme, for example, are reduced from 115 units to 100 units. This reduction has also affected the option units. Students in USM has then very few option units left after they complete their core courses and their university compulsory courses (including English and Malay language courses) to venture and take courses like foreign languages. Other than the beginners' (level 1) course, enrolment for higher level courses (levels 2-4) dropped for almost all foreign language courses including those that have economic potentials,

namely Mandarin and Japanese. Generally students are averse to taking foreign languages. Statistics shows that the intake for level 1 has increased for all courses. However due to the limitation of graduation units in the three-year degree courses, students are not able to continue studying the foreign languages, which they have started, to higher levels. Other than the Japanese and Mandarin minor programmes, which require students to take all courses in the packages, very few students indeed take all four levels of the foreign languages as "option" units. The Japanese language courses, being most popular, always start off with a first level intake of about 500 students but end up with not more than 30 students in the highest level (level 4).

**No. of Students Taking Foreign Language Courses at the  
Centre for Languages and Translation, Universiti Sains  
Malaysia from 1998-2001.**

	Academic Year 2000/2001		Academic Year 1999/2000		Academic Year 1998/1999	
	Sem I	Sem II	Sem I	Sem II	Sem I	Sem II
<b>Arabic</b>	143	216	192	153	120	92
	<b>359</b>		<b>345</b>		<b>212</b>	
<b>Mandarin</b>	52	77	66	45	59	63
	<b>129</b>		<b>111</b>		<b>122</b>	
<b>Spanish</b>	52	53	-	-	-	-
	<b>105</b>		<b>-</b>		<b>-</b>	
<b>German</b>	46	48	91	49	40	33
	<b>94</b>		<b>140</b>		<b>73</b>	
<b>Japanese</b>	246	428	263	295	348	247
	<b>674</b>		<b>558</b>		<b>595</b>	
<b>French</b>	51	75	58	63	34	31
	<b>126</b>		<b>121</b>		<b>65</b>	
<b>Thai</b>	34	36	37	33	28	28
	<b>70</b>		<b>70</b>		<b>56</b>	
<b>(I) Option Core Audit</b>	624	933	707	638	629	494
	<b>1557</b>		<b>1345</b>		<b>1123</b>	
<b>Mandarin (Minor)</b>	16	25	23	16	15	24
	<b>41</b>		<b>39</b>		<b>29</b>	
<b>Japanese (Minor)</b>	31	33	47	35	51	42
	<b>64</b>		<b>82</b>		<b>93</b>	