

# **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>	

	Academic Year 2000/2001		Academic Year 1999/2000		Academic Year 1998/1999	
	Sem I	Sem II	Sem I	Sem II	Sem I	Sem II
	47	58	70	51	66	66
<b>(II) Minor 2</b>	<b>105</b>		<b>121</b>		<b>132</b>	
<b>TOTAL I &amp; II</b>	<b>1662</b>		<b>1466</b>		<b>1255</b>	

This relatively new three-year system is thus a time constraint and a stumbling block for students. The students who can only take a maximum of 22 units per semester is stopped from taking foreign languages because of units and time constraint. The discontinuation of foreign language learning among students creates another problem for the administration of foreign language courses. Certain higher level courses cannot be opened for many semesters due to this insufficient number of students. According to the University's ruling every option course offered must have at least 5 registration students for the course to be taught that particular semester. This ruling has led to many higher level foreign language courses being withdrawn at the end of registration week. Any course which is initially offered but subsequently withdrawn due to lack of students (less than 5) for 4 consecutive semesters will automatically be removed from the University list. Because of this practice, the German language course level 4 suffered this fate and was removed from the list a few years ago. It was reinstated in the university list only last year (after a long and tedious administrative procedure).

When a higher level course is suspended, the few students who are keen to continue have to wait till the next semester (to make up the minimum 5). This is very detrimental to the studying of a newly learned language. Students' keen interest is disrupted and most do not return to continue with the intended course because they have lost interest in the language or have forgotten most of what they have learnt, thus become apprehensive about starting again. The foreign language section has lost many "good" students who would have continued to finish all 4 levels because of this administrative limitation.

As mentioned earlier, foreign language teaching in the centre uses the four-skill philosophy, which is directed to a more comprehensive objective – all the four skills plus culture. Adopting this philosophy means teaching all the four skills and teaching one of the skills, writing, proves difficult to achieve for some languages. Languages like, Thai, Japanese, Mandarin and Arabic, which use scripts “unfamiliar” to students. Learning foreign scripts proves to be a difficult task for many students. In level 1 where they are groping with a new language with different sounds and tones, a totally new script is a real added burden. Although some of these languages (Mandarin and Japanese) with different scripts from the Roman script are what are described as languages with economic potentials, their scripts still prove to be one of the factors, which hinder many students from wanting to take these courses. The numbers of student taking minor courses in Mandarin and Japanese here were somewhat lower for the past 2 years. These are “heavy” courses in “foreign scripts” which must be taken as packages (of 4 compulsory courses). Students are reluctant to undergo such a commitment. They prefer to take this “foreign script” courses, as option units because they are less risky and being not compulsory packages, students feel more at ease to stop at any level, should they feel that they cannot cope.

Malaysia with its multiracial setting has a few different types of schools. The so-called Chinese and Arabic schools have Mandarin and Arabic language taught as one of the subjects in their schools and this provides a base for their students. This background exposure to Mandarin and Arabic causes the intervention of expectations in the courses especially at level 1. Students with zero knowledge in these languages when placed in level 1 with these “privileged” students cannot cope because the teaching of these courses are based on the expectations of the “non-zero knowledged students.” This further discouraged other students from taking these courses.

Student’s motivation is much debated in this centre. For a student to actually want to take a paper for his option units, he/she usually wants to achieve a good grade in that paper.

Ideally, students should take courses for the knowledge imparted in the course but it has to be accepted, especially for option or elective units that students take courses that they can score good grades to better their overall CGPA. This plus the “frightening” new scripts and assumption of non-zero knowledge further discourage the students from wanting to venture into these courses. Apart from the Chinese and Arabic schools, which are not the majority schools in Malaysia, students are not exposed to foreign language learning at the school level. The students have no language appreciation and motivation. The sociolinguistic background of students in a multiracial country does not help at all. Students in schools in Malaysia at a minimum, have the national language and English language to deal with, plus their mother tongue if it is neither of the two languages and thus the idea of another language does not seem attractive. Even students who have to take foreign language courses as core papers for their programme (e.g. Malay studies programme etc.) have low motivation. Language appreciation and motivation is low even when they are encouraged by the reward of units counted as core units towards graduation units.

In USM, the teaching of foreign languages seems to rely a great deal on an *intermediary or the third language*, and not the mother tongue. The third language used is usually English. This is because many teachers are foreigners and they cannot use the Malay language well enough for teaching purposes. Students who are already weak in the English language find this “unfamiliar road” very difficult. Perhaps a teacher who is a native speaker or a near-native speaker of Malay would have been better since apart from them being able to perhaps use Malay as the intermediary language, they will also be good role models and for the students because the teacher can convey the message that mastering a foreign language is an achievable goal.

#### **4. Future plans**

As part of its efforts to provide effective foreign language teaching, the centre has drawn up a tentative plan with the problems and characteristics of foreign language

teaching described above in mind. Below is an outline of this preliminary action plan.

(1) A more communicative approach is used in the teaching where communicative skills and the spoken aspect are stressed upon, especially in the lower levels. The other skills, especially writing should be concentrated upon in the higher levels. This will perhaps eradicate the “frightening” image caused by the foreign scripts. This will mean reorganising and developing new courses for the foreign language section. This has already been agreed upon and the evaluation of the current courses and the development of new ones are already underway.

(2) Discussions in the foreign language section is also looking into the teaching methods and the possibility of using a more direct method of teaching the foreign language instead of the roundabout way of using a 3<sup>rd</sup> language or the translation method. An immersion into the foreign language, even if not total as in the foreign language country would be helpful.

(3) The marketing of languages with economic potentials is increased. Although motivation is natural in the study of this language, students need to be coaxed because of the “frightening scripts” as mentioned before.

(4) The centre hopes to propose foreign language courses, which carry less units in line with the shorter period of undergraduate studies. As this involves policy and has to go through the Senate, this proposal will take time even if it is accepted. As it is, the units of a course have to correspond with the number of contact hours.

(5) The Centre has altered the “in-house” ruling of making the students complete all 4 levels of one foreign language before registering for a new language. Since very few students proceed beyond level 2 anyway, the new ruling is that students only have to take 2 levels of one foreign language before changing to another one. Provided they do not receive an ‘F’ grade (fail) for their examination result, students can proceed from level 2 onwards with even less than a ‘C’ grade (the promotion grade for level 1 is still C). Hopefully, these steps will encourage students to learn more foreign languages and to pursue it further once started.

(6) The centre plans to add new courses to the existing foreign languages offered. There are definite plans to offer Arabic as a new minor programme and possibly Thai as well. Russian has already been placed in the list of future option courses. Due to strong requests from certain quarters among the student population, Tamil language is being seriously considered as another option course. Similar to Mandarin, Tamil will only be offered strictly as a foreign language to those who have “zero-knowledge” of the language. Thus students who have taken courses in these two languages at the primary or secondary school levels are not allowed to register for these languages or at least at the beginners’ levels.

(7) Lastly, the centre is hoping that the encouraging developments in the education system in Malaysia with the introduction of foreign languages (Mandarin, Japanese and French) into schools will motivate and increase students’ appreciation of languages in the country.

It should be noted that this plan is still at a preliminary stage and will be worked-upon further in the near future.