

# CHAPTER 1

## INTRODUCTION

### 1.1 INTRODUCTION

Every year, thousands of international students choose to pursue their tertiary education in Malaysia. In 1996, Malaysia implemented several education reforms to ease the process for international students to enter its higher education institutes, which led to a gradual increase in the number of international students in Malaysia. Chow (2008) reported an increase of 30% in the number of international students between 2006 and 2008, which shows that the total number of international students in Malaysian international and higher education institutions to 65,000 compared to 48,000 in 2006. The largest number of students come from Indonesia and China, followed by the Middle East and African countries. Chow (2008) states that according to Dr. Mohamed Nasser Mohamed Noor, the director of Higher Education Ministry Marketing and International Education Division of the Immigration department, the total number of students from China and Indonesia, in the year 2008, was 15,000, with another 9,000 from the Middle East. According to Sirat (2008) international students accounted for “5 per cent of all tertiary enrolments in Malaysia” in 2008. Dr. Mohamed Nasser Mohamed Noor believes that Malaysia is confident of surpassing the target of hosting 100,000 international students by 2010. As reported by Gooch (2009) in *The New York Times* the total number of international students in Malaysia was 71000 in 2009. *The Star Online* (2010) reported that by Dec 31, 2009, “Malaysia took in 80,700 foreign students from over 150 countries and of that number, 22,400 were in public institutes of higher education and 58,300 in private institutes” (para. 6).

According to Gooch (2009), Malaysian government liberalized its education sector in the 1990s, which facilitated the establishment of more private institutions. She reports that the number of schools in Malaysia “has since expanded to 20 public universities, 36 private universities and 5 foreign branch campuses”. (para. 11)

Sirat (2008) argues that “the impact of September 11 has seen a decreasing number of new applications from Middle Eastern countries to the United States (US)” (p. 79). This was because students from these countries were unwilling to go to the US for their education. Furthermore, after September 11, the US government restricted visa regulations and changed the admissions process for candidates from Middle East, which in turn decreased the number of new enrolments. Sirat (2008) points out that “Malaysia has emerged as an important destination for students from the Middle East. [...] Malaysia provides excellent education and adequate security” (p. 79).

Regardless of why this large number of students prefer to continue their tertiary education in Malaysia, these figures highlight the importance of a need for efficient and effective plans by Malaysian authorities to maintain the present secure and hospitable conditions for the international students to ensure an increasing flow of students to Malaysia in the future.

Among all the needs and demands of the international students living in Malaysia, language and communication requirements is the focus of this study. The following paragraphs are concerned with the languages spoken in Malaysia and the status of the English language in this country.

## 1.2 LANGUAGES SPOKEN IN MALAYSIA

The official language of Malaysia is referred to as '*Bahasa Malaysia*', '*Malay language*' or '*Malaysian Language*'. It is also used for official purposes in Singapore. It is also spoken in southern Thailand, southern Philippines, East Timor, and parts of Indonesia. It is estimated that Bahasa Malaysia (BM hereafter) has between 20 and 40 million speakers as a first language worldwide.

In Malaysia, in 1990s, academics and government officials, started to use the terms '*Bahasa Melayu*' or '*Malay Language*' instead of the term '*Bahasa Malaysia*'. Article 152 of the Federal Constitution states that '*Malay*' is the official language of Malaysia (Attorney General's Chambers). However, Wong & Edwards (2007) has reported, Information Minister, Datuk Seri Zainuddin Maidin stating, "in a unanimous decision in April 2007, the Cabinet felt that reverting to the term *Bahasa Malaysia* would help inculcate a sense of belonging for all citizens irrespective of race". Therefore, "all ministries, public universities and local institutions of higher learning have been directed to inform their relevant departments and agencies to begin using the term Bahasa Malaysia in letters, notices and documents". (para. 3)

Although the constitution recognizes Bahasa Malaysia as the official language, it guarantees the freedom of learning and using other languages. In the amendments made in the National Language Act 1967, English is allowed to continue to be used for some official purposes, in official forms and letters, in the court or in the parliament (The revision of Law Acts 1968, 2006).

Most Chinese ethnic group in Malaysia speak Mandarin, or some other Chinese dialects. Many from the Malaysian Indian ethnic group speak either Tamil or other Indian dialects. Malaysians are trilingual or bilingual at the very least. In public schools,

the medium of instruction is Bahasa Malaysia. However, in the vernacular schools where Chinese or Tamil is the medium of instruction, BM is taught as a compulsory subject. English is the second official language in Malaysia. Therefore, it is taught in all schools as a compulsory second language.

The first two largest groups of foreign students in Malaysia come from China and Indonesia. Since Bahasa Malaysia and Bahasa Indonesia are from the same root and are very much alike, Indonesian students in Malaysia generally do not face obstacles in communicating with Malaysians. Similarly, Chinese students can overcome many communication barriers by using different dialects of Chinese language since the Chinese ethnic group is the second largest in Malaysia. International students, who speak any languages other than the languages spoken in Malaysia, can highly rely on English to communicate with Malaysians. However, there can be many instances when they need to comprehend or use BM. Therefore, learning the official language of their host country can be beneficial to them.

To cater for international students' language needs, most universities and colleges in Malaysia offer basic to intermediate BM courses to their undergraduate and postgraduate candidates. Attending and passing these courses are compulsory in some universities and optional in others. For example, attending a basic course of Bahasa Malaysia is compulsory for all international students of the University of Malaya (UM hereafter), Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM), Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM), International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM) and some other higher educational institutions.

In this study, the term *Bahasa Malaysia* and the acronym *BM* are used to refer to the lingua franca of Malaysia.

### 1.3 INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS IN THE UNIVERSITY OF MALAYA

The data obtained from the Institute of Postgraduate Studies of UM, shows that a total number of 2473 postgraduate international candidates enrolled in UM in the years 2007-2009. In all three years, Iranian students are the largest group of international candidates, as a total number of 695 students from Iran registered in UM from 2007 to 2009. This accounts for more than 28% of the total number of postgraduate international candidates. The second largest group is Indonesians (N=296) which includes almost 12% of the international students. Candidates from Iraq, Sudan, China, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, and Yemen stand next. Figure 1.1 shows the number of postgraduate international students who registered in UM from 2007 to 2009 from the countries with more than 20 candidates.

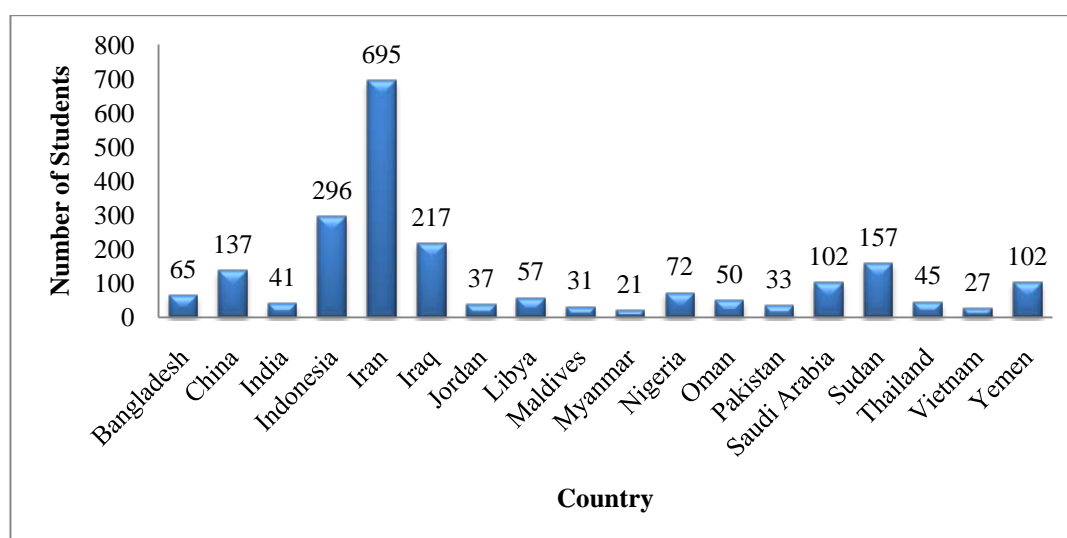


Figure 1.1 Number of Postgraduate International Students Enrolled in 2007-2009

The figures from different years, demonstrate almost the same pattern. Iran and other Middle Eastern countries are the largest group, followed by Indonesia, Sudan and China. The following charts show the number of postgraduate international students from different countries that had ten or more registered candidates in the University of Malaya in the years 2007, 2008 and 2009.

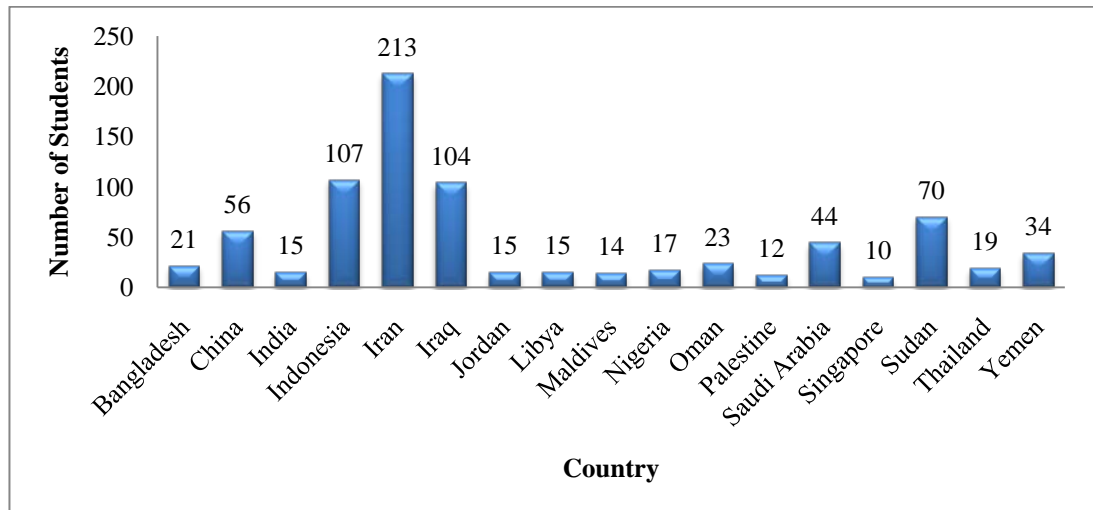


Figure 1.2 Number of Postgraduate International Students Enrolled in 2007

As illustrated in Figure 1.2, from the total number of 909 students in 2007, 213 were from Iran, 107 students were from Indonesia and 104 were from Iraq. The chart only shows the countries that had ten or more postgraduate candidates. The countries can be categorized into three groups: 1) Iran and other Middle Eastern countries, which account for the largest number of international candidates, 2) the neighbouring eastern countries such as Indonesia, Singapore, Thailand, Maldives, China, India, and Bangladesh, and 3) African countries such as Nigeria, Libya and Sudan.

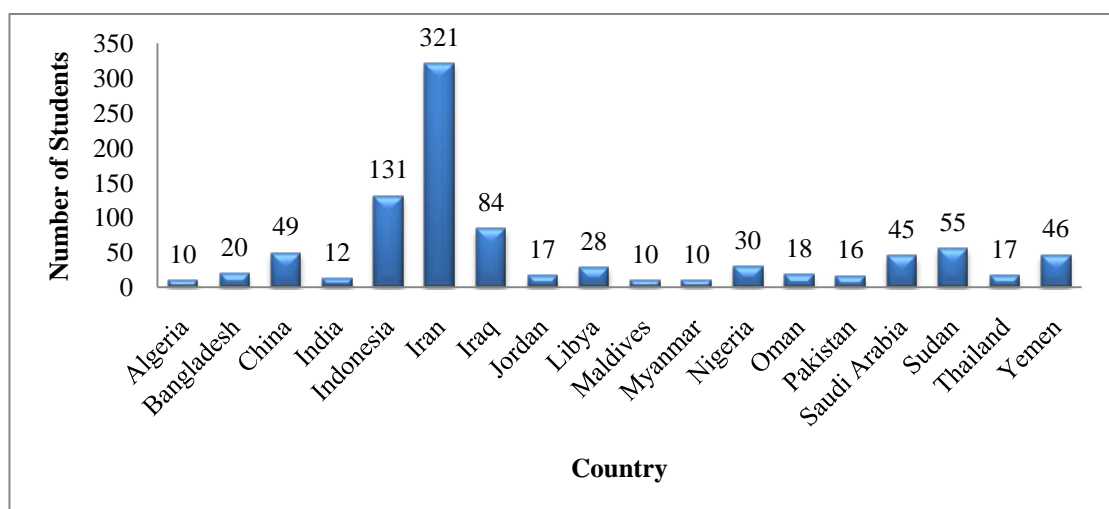


Figure 1.3 Number of Postgraduate International Students Enrolled in 2008

The numbers of postgraduate international students who enrolled in the year 2008 are illustrated in Figure 1.3. From the total number of 1035 candidates from 64 countries who started their postgraduate studies in UM in 2008, more than 31% (N=321) were from Iran. More than 12% (N=107) were from Indonesia and more than 11% (N=102) came from African countries such as Nigeria, Libya and Sudan.

Figure 1.4 presents and compares the number of postgraduate candidates from different countries who enrolled in UM until the end of the first session of academic year 2009-2010. The chart only shows the countries with more than 10 postgraduate candidates.

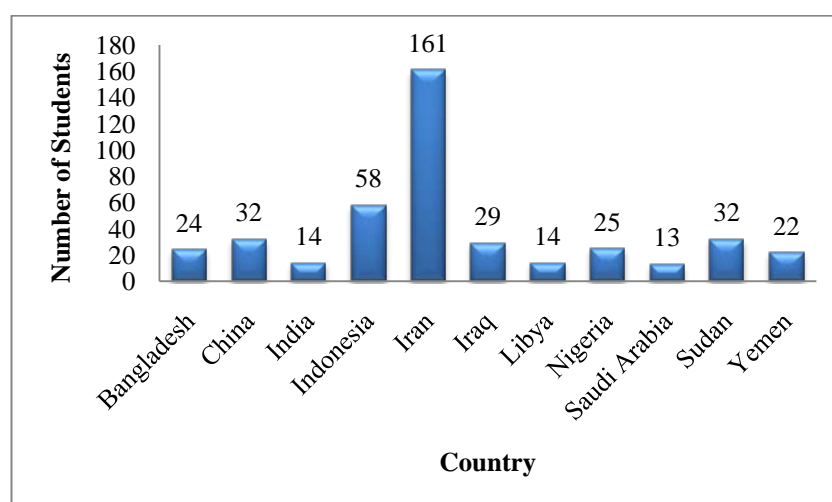


Figure 1.4 Number of Postgraduate International Students Enrolled in 2009

The figures presented in this section only displayed the number of postgraduate candidates. International undergraduate candidates are also required to attend and pass the same BM course as the postgraduate candidates. However, their classes are held separately and in different times and venue from the postgraduate candidates.

## **1.4 THE BAHASA MALAYSIA COURSE IN THE UNIVERSITY OF MALAYA**

The BM course in UM is designed and organized by the faculty of Languages and Linguistics. The teachers use the same syllabus for all the international students including, postgraduate and undergraduate students. The details about the course will be provided in the following sections.

### **1.4.1 Duration and Venue**

Since the second semester of the academic year 2008-2009, the postgraduate international students who sign up for the BM course are divided into several groups of 10 to 15 students and the classes are held intensively over a three-week period with three sessions each week. Every week, they have 10 hours of class, which are two sessions of four-hour duration and a session of two-hour duration. That is, the students attend 30 hours of language training in a period of only three weeks. Whereas, previously, the students attended 14 sessions of two-hour duration throughout a semester. For postgraduate candidates, the classes are held in the Institute of Postgraduate Studies (IPS hereafter) located on the eastern angle of the campus.

The change mentioned above might have been made for two main reasons. First, in the previous schedule, the classes were usually very big consisting of 40-60 students. Such large classes usually do not fulfil the teachers and the students' expectations from the language course and do not facilitate the process of learning for the students, and more often than not, discourage and demotivate students. Second, the students used to have to attend one session a week throughout the semester, which made it inconvenient for the international students who normally come from different faculties on or off campus.



The undergraduate students' BM course follows the old system of 14 sessions of one session a week, throughout a semester. Another difference between the postgraduate and undergraduate candidates is that the undergraduate students pay for the BM course, whereas, for postgraduate students, the course is offered free of charge.

The venue for students of the Faculty of Medicine is their own faculty. The BM classes for undergraduate international students are held in the faculty of Languages and Linguistics located on the west side of the campus.

Currently, two teachers conduct the sessions for each group, that is, a given group of postgraduate or undergraduate students have one teacher for some sessions and another teacher for the other sessions.

#### **1.4.2 The Syllabus**

The same syllabus is used and followed in classes for all groups of the students, i.e. the postgraduate and undergraduate candidates. The BM course, which is offered to international students in UM, is a basic course designed for beginners. The syllabus of the current BM course has been designed and prepared by the primary teacher of this course, who is a BM teacher from the faculty of Languages and Linguistics. The student book used in the classroom is a photocopied booklet of 40 pages, which is sold to the students on the first session of the class. The first lesson deals with the introduction of the alphabet and sounds in BM along with several examples for each letter and sound. Each lesson is followed by mostly fill-in-the-blank and matching exercises. Table 1.1 outlines the syllabus of the BM course.

Table 1.1 The BM Course Syllabus

<b>Lesson</b>	<b>Topic</b>
<b>1</b>	The Alphabet and Sounds
<b>2</b>	Greeting
<b>3</b>	Giving and Asking for personal Information
<b>4</b>	Numbers and Time
<b>5</b>	Days, Months and Dates
<b>6</b>	Questions
<b>7</b>	Prepositions and Adverbs of Place
<b>8</b>	Tenses
<b>9</b>	Prepositions
<b>10</b>	Reading Comprehension

The syllabus of the BM course can be generally described as a notional-functional syllabus. A notional-functional syllabus, unlike a structural syllabus, which is based on grammatical structures, is organized based on notions and functions that are used and needed by language learners. In this model, a ‘notion’ is a particular ‘context’ or ‘situation’ in which people communicate. A ‘function’ is a specific purpose for a speaker in a given context (Brown, 1994). For example, the ‘notion’, of having dinner in a restaurant requires numerous language ‘functions’, such as asking for the menu, ordering food, and asking for the bill.

Similarly, the syllabus of the BM course is organized based on ‘notions’ such as greetings, time and space, and provides the learner with functions such as asking for and giving personal information, asking for and giving time, and congratulating. However, some lessons in the syllabus are based on grammatical structures such as questions,

tenses, and prepositions. Therefore, the BM language programme has applied different approaches to syllabus design to provide a basic foreign language training course for international students.

According to White (1988) “where functional categories become a principal feature of language syllabus content, the issue of needs analysis soon follows” (p. 75). He explains while we cannot say that a language learner ‘needs’ the past tense, we can argue that they might need to “report events and narrate stories”. Thus, a functional syllabus calls for a needs analysis as a stage in the process of its design. Since the designer(s) of the current BM course have tried to follow a notional-functional approach, it is, therefore, necessary that they include functions and notions of the language, which are most needed by international students in Malaysia. To achieve that goal, a formal needs analysis can be a useful first stage in designing a new BM course syllabus or revising the current syllabus if necessary.

### **1.5 STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM**

Attending the BM course is compulsory for all international students of University of Malaya. In November 1997, a decree was issued by the Malaysian government through the ministry of higher education, which made attending a Bahasa Malaysia course compulsory for all international students enrolled in the University of Malaya. In 2007, 909 postgraduate international students registered in UM. This figure for the year 2008 is 1035, and 502 for the first session of 2009-2010. In the academic year 2007-2008, 204 international students attended the BM course and in 2008-2009, 527 students participated in the course (figures obtained from Institute of Postgraduate Studies).

These figures highlight the importance of this course as it addresses a large group of students every semester. More importantly, to a large number of international students, this class and what is taught in it can be their very first formal encounter with Bahasa Malaysia and Malaysian culture, and even the University of Malaya as the conductor of the course. The other issue that makes this course worthy of notice is the significant amount of time spent every semester by the students and the teachers in the classes. The other issue that makes this course unique is that it aims to train students from various countries with their particular language proficiencies, cultural backgrounds, aims and needs. For all the above reasons it is essential that the syllabus of the course contains the materials that sufficiently meet the participants' language needs and expectations.

In the second session of the academic year 2008-2009, the researcher attended the BM course in UM. At the time, the course was held throughout the semester once a week in 14 sessions of 2-hour duration. The classes were large with more than 40 students in each class. The largeness of the class was not the only problem observed. The learning activities provided in the text book were all of the same nature and there was only one type of exercise: fill-in-the-blanks and matching. Visuals were used very rarely, and there were no listening exercises. The syllabus was obviously not designed to cater for the various types of learners in the class. Students, who had come from different parts around the globe, sat together in a language class that failed to attract their attention or engage them in learning activities. Apart from the class activities that did not seem appealing to most students, the content of the syllabus and the language functions and notions included in the booklet did not cover all our needs regarding BM. Observing this problem, the researcher decided to carry out a Needs Analysis (NA hereafter) study for the BM course offered in UM. The NA study was done as the

research project for the Applied Linguistics course, which is offered as a core course to students of Master of Linguistics in the Faculty of Languages and Linguistics in UM. The purpose of the NA was to identify most frequently used language functions and skills needed by international students in their daily encounters with Malaysians. As the main instrument of data collection, a questionnaire was designed and handed out to the international students attending the course at the time. A total number of 75 questionnaires were collected and the data were analyzed through the frequency analysis of the SPSS software. The results revealed several mismatches between the language needs of the UM international students and the components of the present course of BM. The mismatches were especially evident when the functional use of the language was concerned. The majority of international students admitted that they frequently needed daily functional use of BM, such as understanding traffic signs, or bills, communicating with shopkeepers, taxi drivers, or waiters, asking for and giving directions, or filling out forms. However, although the current syllabus of this course (see Table 1.1) includes some basic functions and notions of the language such as greetings, asking for and giving time, it clearly lacks sufficient authentic reading materials, and daily language functions of BM. Since the NA project for the course of Applied Linguistics had to be done on a small and manageable scale to fit the limitations of a project paper, it did not include students' learning style preferences.

Since 1997, when Malaysian Ministry of Higher Education required UM to offer a BM course to all its international students, the syllabus of the course has not changed much. The only change that has been made to the course is its timing and duration. The number of international students in UM has multiplied since 1997, so has the diversity of nationalities and cultural backgrounds of the international students. As a result, the syllabus of the BM course, which was previously taught to a much smaller group of

students, can no longer cater for the present number and mixture of international students in UM.

For all the above reasons, the current BM course would much more effectively benefit UM's international students if its syllabus is revised and adapted to the students' needs. The findings of the preliminary NA study were not comprehensive and did not cover questions regarding all aspects of the target situations and students' learning needs. Therefore, a formal NA study seemed necessary to be carried out on the BM course. In the following sections, more details about the objectives and research questions of this study will be provided.

#### **1.6 PURPOSE OF THE STUDY**

One of the main aims of conducting a Needs Analysis, according to Gardner and Winslow (1983) is "to produce information which when acted upon makes courses better adapted to students' needs" (p. 76). Accordingly, this NA study aims to identify international students' needs regarding Bahasa Malaysia and provide accurate information for the language planners of this course to, if necessary, modify and adapt the current course to those needs.

Similarly, Richards (1990) believes that Needs Analysis serves three main purposes:

- 1) Providing a mechanism for obtaining a wider range of input into the content, design and implementation of a language program.
- 2) Identifying general or specific language needs that can be addressed in developing goals, objectives and the content for a language program.
- 3) Providing data that can serve as the basis for reviewing and evaluating an existing program.

(Richards, 1990, pp. 1-2)

In line with the objectives stated by Richards (1990), this NA study aims to provide the syllabus designers with feedback from students to review, evaluate, and revise the current course if necessary. Furthermore, the data collected through this NA study is hoped to serve as valued input for the BM course designers to prepare, organize and administer a language course that can meet the general and specific language needs of the international students.

### **1.7 AIMS OF THE STUDY**

This study attempts to pursue the following objectives:

- a) explore language skills of Bahasa Malaysia that are most frequently needed by international students of the University of Malaya;
- b) identify notions and functions that are most frequently needed by learners;
- c) investigate students' learning style preferences;

### **1.8 RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

Based on the objectives of the study, the research questions are as follows:

- 1) What language skills of Bahasa Malaysia do international students need more frequently?
- 2) What specific notions and functions of Bahasa Malaysia do international students need more frequently?
- 3) What are the learning style preferences of international students?

## 1.9 SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

Every year, more than one thousand international students begin pursuing their tertiary education in the University of Malaya. These students come from more than 60 different countries. The BM course offered to the international students is supposed to cater for a unique group of language learners, with their diverse cultural, academic and language backgrounds.

In order to design a language course syllabus that addresses such a unique group of learners, it is vital to have sufficient information on *what* these learners are like, and *what* they *want* and *need* to learn, and *how* they want to learn them. To obtain that information, conducting a Needs Analysis study seems inevitable.

The findings of this NA study will reveal valuable data about international students' true language needs and wants, their language learning style preferences, and their expectations from a BM course. These data will benefit various stakeholders including international students in Malaysia, BM course planners of the Faculty of Languages and Linguistics at the University of Malaya, BM teachers of the course in UM, and language course planners at other universities in Malaysia that offer a BM course to their international students.

The international students in Malaysia are exposed to and are required to use their host country's official language in various situations throughout their stay in different cities in Malaysia. For the international students currently staying in Malaysia, the findings of this study will be beneficial in helping them realize the common language needs of their fellow students for BM. This awareness will guide them in fining language skills and language functions that they might most frequently need during their stay. As a result, those students whose universities do not offer them a BM



course will be informed of the areas of difficulty regarding BM and will seek resources to learn and improve those areas. Besides, the learning resources that will be introduced in the last chapter of this research report (see 5.3.2 IMPLICATIONS FOR THE TEACHERS AND COURSE DESIGNERS, page 153), together with the analysis of the data about the most frequently needed language skills and functions, will be of utmost value for the thousands of students who plan to choose Malaysia for their tertiary education. Having prior knowledge of the language areas that are most frequently used by international students in Malaysia, the prospective students can begin learning BM even before moving to Malaysia, by using the books and online resources introduced in this research, and other resources available at their home country. Learning their host country's official language before arriving in Malaysia can boost their confidence, and prepare them greatly to cope with cultural unfamiliarity, and communicational barriers after their arrival in Malaysia, and even until the end of their stay here.

The other group of stakeholders who will benefit from the findings of this study are the BM course syllabus designers at the University of Malaya. A formal Needs Analysis study together with analysis of the learners' learning style preferences, provides rich input that can be considered when designing a new BM syllabus, or revising the current syllabus. The answers to the three research questions posed in the previous sections will provide invaluable information about international students' most frequently used and needed language skills, language functions, as well as their learning style preferences. Such data can help the BM syllabus designers to select topics, lessons, and learning activities that would benefit learners most. This improvement in the BM course syllabus would in turn benefit the international students in UM, as they would use a course syllabus that covers their language needs and agrees with their learning

style preferences. The teachers of the BM course would also prepare and deliver better lesson plans that could best fit their students' needs and learning style preferences.

The University of Malaya is not the only university that offers a BM course to its international students. Other reputable universities, such as Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM), Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM), International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM), Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM), and some other universities and colleges have made BM a compulsory course. Therefore, the methodology and findings of this study can similarly be useful to different stakeholders of the BM course in other universities in Malaysia.

The Ministry of Higher Education in Malaysia has issued a decree that has made attending a BM course compulsory for the international students following their tertiary education in certain universities in Malaysia. The findings of this study would also be informative to the authorities in the said ministry to better evaluate and consider international students' true needs regarding Bahasa Malaysia. This awareness can be helpful in making future decisions and dealing with international students' issues and concerns.

#### **1.10 SCOPE AND LIMITATIONS**

The focus of this study was to identify Bahasa Malaysia needs of UM international students and their preferred learning styles. Participants were selected from the international students who attended the BM course in the second session of academic year 2009-2010. Since the BM course was offered in intensive courses of 3-week duration to postgraduate candidates, only the last two groups were attending the BM classes when the questionnaire of this study was administered which was during the last two weeks of the semester.

To address all the international students who had taken the course in that semester, an electronic version of the questionnaire was prepared and emailed to the postgraduate candidates who had attended the course earlier in the semester. A total number of 50 emails were sent and nine questionnaires were filled and emailed back to the researcher. The majority of the students were not present in the session when the questionnaires were administered to the undergraduate students. Therefore, the electronic questionnaire was emailed to the absent students. Twelve questionnaires were emailed back by the undergraduate candidates. Thus, the total number of subjects involved in this study added up to 52 international students, including 27 postgraduate candidates and 25 undergraduate candidates who had attended the BM course in University of Malaya.

Six undergraduate respondents and ten postgraduate respondents volunteered to do an interview, from whom two undergraduate and two postgraduate candidates were selected for interviews.

The time for administrating the questionnaires was decided to be by the end of the semester so that participants would be able to answer particular questions related to the classroom, materials and the teaching styles used during the course. The interviews were conducted after analysis of the data from the questionnaires, as the participants were meant to suggest explanations and reasons for significant results.

### **1.11 DEFINITION OF TERMS**

In the field of language teaching, and English language teaching in particular, several definitions of relevant terms have been suggested by the scholars and researchers. These definitions may be different; however, they have the same basic

meanings. Thus, to prevent any confusion or misunderstanding, the following definitions are employed in this study.

*English for Specific Purposes* (ESP hereafter) according to Hutchinson and Waters (1987, p. 19) is defined as “an approach to language teaching in which all decisions as to content and method are based on the learner's reason for learning”.

Hutchinson and Waters (1987) refer to *Needs Analysis* (NA) as a process of “identifying the target situation and then carrying out a rigorous analysis of the linguistic features of that situation” (p. 12)

Hutchinson and Waters (1987) have differentiated *target needs* and *learning needs*. *Target needs* are the learners’ language requirements in the target situation, be it occupational or academic. Target needs of learners are classified as *necessities*, *lacks* and *wants*.

*Learning needs* are what the learners’ require to learn the language. Learning needs include learning style preferences of the learners.

When referring to language, a *notion* is a particular ‘context’ or ‘situation’ in which people communicate. A *function* is a specific purpose for a speaker in a given context (Brown 1994). In other words, “notions are the meanings and concepts the learners needs in order to communicate (e.g. time, duration, location)”, and the “language needed to express these concepts and meanings” are called *functions* or *speech acts* (Richards & Schmidt 2002, pp. 365-366).