

Critical languages enter campus dialect

Roger Starkey | Posted: Tuesday, August 21, 2012 9:00 am

The Foreign Languages and Literature Department introduced courses in Russian, Turkish and Brazilian Portuguese — three languages classified as critical — this fall.

A foreign language is deemed critical when the need for trained speakers in these languages exceeds the number of speakers available in a country. Brazil native Joao Sedycias, chair of the Department of Foreign Languages and Literature, said SIUE is the only university in the area offering a Critical Languages Program.

“These language programs are usually found in places like New York, Los Angeles or Chicago,” Sedycias said. “This sets SIUE apart from institutions of the same size.”

Sedycias said the Critical Languages Program is part of a goal for the College of Arts and Sciences to internationalize. The program also aligns with Sedycias’ effort to work with other campus departments to better serve students.

Senior economics major Nick Zyznieuski, of Springfield, said offering the courses in the Critical Languages Program is a step in the right direction.

“Students can broaden their horizons, especially the Brazilian Portuguese for business students,” Zyznieuski said.

Graduate student in speech pathology Kelsey Crowe, of Coal Valley, said the exchange students could assist those learning a foreign language.

“The students we get from Turkey can really help those studying Turkish,” Crowe said. “There was a student from Spain last year that was able to help us in our Spanish class.”

Shortly after Sedycias arrived on campus in July 2011, he met with the ROTC program and learned there was a need to train the cadets in languages that were not available at SIUE. This helped inspire the start of the SIUE Critical Languages Program.

Sedycias said students of the Critical Languages Program can apply what they learned in many different ways. Some may use their language skills in business or diplomacy, or to peacefully engage the locals while on a military mission and others to combat terrorism.

The Portuguese taught as part of the Critical Languages Program will be Brazilian Portuguese. Sedycias said this was partly due to a request by the ROTC, but it will also benefit the members of the new Brazilian Exchange Program and those studying business. Brazil is the world’s sixth largest economy.

According to Sedycias, the Portuguese spoken in Brazil is vastly different from that spoken in Portugal.

“The written languages can look very similar, but the pronunciation is very different,” Sedycias said.

The Critical Languages Program at SIUE is part of the National Association of Self-Instructional Language Programs. NASILP has over 110 institutional members that use materials and support to provide their students a self-instruction option in critical or less commonly taught languages. Sedycias said NASILP has allowed SIUE to offer courses in languages that could not have been offered otherwise.

Students who enroll in a language offered through the Critical Languages Program will use texts and audio material from a CD or DVD. A native language tutor will provide three hours of drill sessions with the students every week.

Sedycias said self-instructional courses are not for everyone.

“The students who thrive in this environment are very disciplined, have a great desire to learn the language, or have a very specific professional goal,” Sedycias said.

The NASILP offerings do not include literature or culture, two facets Sedycias said should be included when learning a new language. Chinese and Arabic are considered critical languages but are offered in a more robust way at SIUE than NASILP offers. For this reason, Chinese and Arabic will not be part of the Critical Languages Program.

According to Sedycias, the two years of courses offered through the Critical Languages Program are enough to meet the professional and academic needs of most students. No courses can be offered in the Critical Languages Program unless a native-speaking tutor is available to come to campus to assist students. Sedycias has fielded requests for classes in Japanese, Urdu, Tagalog, Korean and Polish, but, because he has been unable to locate a native-speaking tutor, the classes cannot be offered.

Conversely, tutors are available in Hindi, Farsi, Dari, Azari, Pashto and Balochi. No students have yet expressed interest in taking the courses.

Any student interested in taking a course in a language with already identified tutors or becoming a tutor in one of the languages identified above should contact Sedycias at jsedyci@siue.edu or 618-650-3512.