Critical languages teaches rare tongues

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Staff Writer

Two students sit around a table learning simple sentences from a tutor like “Mary and John are friends.”

They’re speaking in Swahili, and the tutor, Teles Machibya, is a native Swahili speaker.

Across campus, 175 students are learning 14 different languages, from Vietnamese to Polish, all as part of the critical languages program at the UA.

The program, which began 11 years ago, offers some of the traditionally less-popular languages for a U.S. university, like Hindi, Scots-Gaelic and Tagalog.

“We respond to students’ needs,” said Alexander Dunkel, director of the critical language program. “The need is growing for these classes.”

But the critical languages department is thinking about targeting high schools to inform students of the program, Dunkel said.

The program began in 1998 with four students studying Hungarian. There are now 175 students, studying 14 languages.

In recent years, the program has also offered courses in Czech, Hindi-Urdu, Hungarian, Indonesian, Irish-Gaelic, Kazakh, Korean, Swahili, Swedish, Turkish, Ukrainian and Uzbek.

Tutors teach classes and prepare students for final exams given by an examiner. The classes are “audio lingual,” or run with the help of cassette tapes to learn the language. CDs are also available with the language programs.

“We try to tell students about the programs,” Dunkel said. “But the languages start not because we need them, but because students ask for the programs.”

At least four students must be interested in a language to start a class. Students pay $280 to enroll for a four-unit class.

The fee goes directly to the tutors who teach the classes, Dunkel said.

The UA has dropped 11 slots from last year’s number 39.

"In general, I try not to pay much attention to rankings," he said. "There are many different rankings that cater to different people. I think what’s important is for the university is to provide a quality education."

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