

# Study on the Language Curriculum System of the United States Air Force Academy

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**Abstract:** The United States Air Force Academy (USAFA), one of the important language teaching implementation institutions in the United States military academies, plays an essential role in improving the language ability of U.S. Air Force personnel. Based on the USAFA Curriculum Handbook for the Class of 2017-2018, this paper briefly introduces the Academy's language curriculum system in terms of such aspect as the purpose, types, and course offerings of the language academic programs as well as the teaching approaches, summarizing characteristics of the language curriculum system, and finally offering references for the foreign language teaching reform in the PLA military universities and colleges.

## 1. Introduction

The United States Air Force Academy (USAFA), one of the major language teaching institutions in the United States military academies, plays an important role in improving the language ability of the United States Air Force personnel. It issues the latest Curriculum Handbook every academic year in accordance with the national strategy of the US Department of Defense and the US Air Force, describing in detail the teaching philosophy, syllabus, curriculum and other aspects, including course offerings, types, teaching implementation and other contents of language-related majors. After a long-term improvement and continuous renewal, a relatively complete language teaching system has been formed. Based on the USAFA Curriculum Handbook for the 2017-2018 academic year (hereinafter referred to as the Curriculum Handbook), this paper analyzes the language curriculum system of USAFA English Majors and Foreign Language Minors so as to explore the system's characteristics and provide enlightenment and reference for the foreign language teaching reform in China's military academies.

## 2. Overview of the language curriculum system

The academic programs involved in language teaching in USAFA include English Majors and Foreign Language Minors. The former are provided by the English Department while the latter the Foreign Language Department.

### 2.1 Course objectives

The overall objectives claimed in USAFA Institutional Outcome White Papers is to develop the cadets into highly qualified military officers and citizens with broad knowledge and language capacity, creativity and independent thinking ability through general studies. Specific objectives claimed clearly in USAFA Institutional Outcome White Papers contain nine aspects: (1) clear communication (2) critical thinking (3) application of engineering methods (4) scientific reasoning and the principles of science (5) human condition, culture and societies (6) leadership and teamwork and organizational management (7) ethics and respect for human dignity (8) national security of the American republic in a complex global environment (9) warrior ethos as airmen and citizens.<sup>[1]</sup>

Among these goals, "clear communication" comes first because USAFA believes that it is essential for successful officers and high quality leaders and it is the primary goal of all language

curriculum. Through clear and effective oral and written communication, high-quality officers can not only express their thoughts and intentions, accurately convey the main idea of important documents, win the trust of others, but even change the attitude and values of others, which is of great significance in cadets' future military career and operations. Therefore, in order to achieve this goal, USAFA provides her cadets with a variety of training and practice platforms (such as communication tasks) through language courses to improve their oral and written communication skills.

The second major skill that language teaching focuses on is "critical thinking ability". At the Academy, critical thinking refers to the conscious, reflective reasoning processes used to solve problems and make decisions without sufficient information. This ability is developed throughout all stages of language skills development at the Academy where various activities are conducted.

## 2.2 Types and requirements of academic programs

According to the Curriculum Handbook, USAFA majors offer three types of courses: core curriculum consisting of academic core courses and physical education courses, professional curriculum, and academic optional courses.

The cadets will not be admitted to graduate until they finish these three types of courses and obtain the appropriate semester hours.

Academic core courses are the basic academic courses which require all on-campus cadets to complete upon graduation since these courses can lay a broad and solid foundation of science and humanity for the cadets to meet the requirements of military service. There are 31 academic core courses consisting of thirty 3.0-semester hour courses, one 1.5-semester hour course, and five semester hours of physical education courses for a total of 96.5 semester hours of core. Major courses are the ones that need to be studied to meet the requirements of a certain specialty. They lay the foundation for cadets to develop their profession. The number of major courses in each academic year varies according to the different majors. Basically, the major courses consist of eleven to fifteen courses with no more than forty-five semester hours. Academic options are non-core courses with generally a 3-semester hour. USAFA offers an optional course in either a single disciplinary major (e.g., English Major) or an interdisciplinary major (e.g., Foreign Area Studies Major). (in Table 1)

Table 1 Types and Semester Hours of Academic Programs at USAFA

Course Type		Course number	Semester Hours
Core Curriculum	Academic Core courses	31	91.5
	PE Core courses	10	5
major courses		11-15	No more than 45
Academy Option		1	3

### 2.2.1 Types of academic programs in english major

The types, numbers and semester hours in English major are consistent with those of all majors at USAFA. That is to say the USAFA offers thirty-one academic core courses with 91.5 semester hours in total, ten physical education core courses five semester hours in total and one option 3 semester hours. The biggest difference between English and other majors lies in major courses because the English major offers 12 major courses including four compulsory courses, eight major options and two seminars with 36 semester hours in total. (in Table 2)

Table 2 Types and Semester Hours of Academic Programs for English Major

Course Type	Course number	Semester Hours	Semester Hours in total
Academic Core courses	31	91.5	137 (for Class of 2018) 135.5 (for Classes of 2019-2020)
PE Core courses	10	5	
English Major curriculum	4 compulsory courses	36	
	6 options		
	2 seminars		
Academy Option	1	3	

### 2.2.2 Foreign language minors

Foreign Language Minors are offered by the Foreign languages Department. According to the Curriculum Handbook, USAFA offers eight foreign language minors such as Arabic, Chinese, French, German, Japanese, Portuguese, Russian, and Spanish<sup>[1]</sup>. Each foreign language minor offers a variety of courses, which are divided into courses for developing language skills and reinforcement. Six level courses consisting of all 100 - and 200 - level courses and the majority of the 300 - level courses are basic courses, which are designed to understanding of the language, society, and culture of the target countries or regions and to improving cadets' cross-culture communication ability with people from different backgrounds.

Foreign language courses at levels of 365 and 400-400 are intensive courses offered mainly in the fourth academic year. They aim to expand the cadets' understanding of specific culture, history and literature so as to develop and maintain language skills. There are seven intensive courses taught in such different ways as classroom teaching and independent study. The cadets will learn six classroom courses plus one self-teaching course. The former type of course involves five courses with 3-semester hours for each and one course with less than 3 semester hours (As for how many semester hours will be offered, it is decided by the dean of the Foreign language Department). Besides, the independent study course has 3 semester hours. In other words, cadets will gain 19-21 semester hours after completing the intensive courses and 37-39 semester hours for completing all courses in one foreign language minor. (in Table 3)

Table 3 Types and Requirements for Each Foreign Language Minor

Types	Teaching approach	curriculum	Semester hours for each minor	Semester hours in total
courses for developing language skills	Classroom teaching	6	3	18
Intensive courses	Classroom teaching	5	3	19--21
	Classroom teaching	1	1-3	
	Independent study	1	3	
Total		13	-----	37-39

### 2.3 Curriculum offered

Courses offered in different disciplines vary greatly with different objectives, even if they are all courses of language majors.

#### 2.3.1 English major courses and their characteristics

The courses offered by English majors are mainly about writing and literature. Divided into elementary, intermediate and advanced levels, the courses aim to develop the ability of "clear communication " and "critical thinking ".

The literature courses involve the British and American literary works of different styles, genres, and themes in different times. For example, according to the theme, literary works are divided into general literature and war literature. If classified by genre, they can be divided into novel, poetry, drama, prose and so on. The four compulsory courses of this major are: Introduction to American literature, English literature before 1780, modern English literature after 1780 till now, and Shakespeare literature. Through appreciating and criticizing these works, the cadets can not only learn the theory of literary criticism but also improve their comprehensive ability of critical analysis and communication. In addition, the option courses study such subjects as fine arts, history, foreign area studies, law, philosophy, etc.

In general, it is very flexible for cadets to choose English major courses according to their own interests and hobbies. All the courses in this major focus on cultivating the cadets' ability of clear communication and critical thinking.

### 2.3.2 Foreign Language Minor Courses

USAFA regards such foreign languages as Arabic, Chinese, French, German, Japanese, Portuguese, Russian, and Spanish --eight of the most important languages in the world. Therefore, the cadets are required to study one or two of these languages. Within each language there is a broad spectrum of courses with almost the same objectives, requirements, semester hours, and assessment criteria. The 100-and 200-level courses, and Foreign Language 321 and Foreign Language 322 are primarily skills development courses. The remaining courses are regarded as enhancement courses and are designed to develop a broader based appreciation of a particular culture, history, and literature, providing additional opportunities to develop and refine cadets' language skills. Student presentations and classroom discussions based on selected readings/topics in culture and civilization of language studied. Language Learning Center may supplement classroom instruction.

Foreign languages 131-132 are the most basic sequential courses, which mainly study the language, culture and society of a specific foreign language such as Arab. Cadets are required to understand the corresponding culture and analyze and compare the corresponding social themes while learning the language. The foreign language major has no specific requirements on the language level. That is to say, any cadet with lower or even no basis can apply for the minor. Any cadet who has not learned the foreign language or who has got a lower score on a placement test is required to take the 100-level courses which are designed to cultivate and develop one of the USAFA nine objectives--- the human identity, culture and society.

For one of the eight foreign languages, the courses, objectives, requirements in the four-year study present systematic and progressive characteristics. The following tables taking Arabic as an example to better display the characteristics of the foreign language curriculum. (in Table 4 and Table 5).<sup>[1]</sup>

Table 4 Arabic Skills Development Courses

Level	Code	Course	Semester	Objectives and Requirements
Foundational (Basic Sequence)	Arabic 131	Basic Arabic	Fall, 1 <sup>st</sup> Academic Year	Introduction to the language, culture, and societies of Arabic-speaking countries. Cadets will explore language and also compare and contrast societal themes as they relate to cultures speaking that foreign language.
	Arabic 132		Spring, 1 <sup>st</sup> Academic Year	
Inter-mediate	Arabic 211	Intermediate Arabic I	Fall, 2 <sup>nd</sup> Academic Year	Refinement of communication in Arabic language through intensification of aural and reading comprehension.
	Arabic 222	Intermediate Arabic II	Spring, 2 <sup>nd</sup> Academic Year	Continued refinement of Arabic language. Emphasis on conversational practice and aural comprehension of contemporary spoken language.
Advanced (Capstone courses)	Arabic 321	Advanced Arabic I	Fall, 3 <sup>rd</sup> Academic Year	A capstone communication course designed to enhance cadets' ability in Arabic language and culture.
	Arabic 322	Advanced Arabic II	Spring, 3 <sup>rd</sup> Academic Year	A follow-on capstone communication course to Arabic 321 designed to further develop and improve the cadets' ability in the language and culture.

Table 5 Arabic Enhancement Courses

Code	Theme	Semester	Objectives and Requirements
Arabic 365	Civilization, culture, and contemporary issues (military, political, economic) of Arabic countries concerned	Fall, 4th Academic Year	As a prerequisite for subsequent language courses, this course is a discussion in Arabic and is based on selected readings in the language.
Arabic 410	Significant current events in Arabic regions	Spring, 4th Academic Year	Cadets are required to make a semester-long survey of significant current events in Arabic regions and study and research the cultural, political, economic, and historic factors that affect current reality. The course uses available sources from the internet, newspapers, television, radio broadcasts, etc. to carry out its objectives. Emphasis is placed on oral discussions and written production. All class activities are conducted in the target language.
Arabic 420	Introduction to Literature	Fall, 4th Academic Year	Survey of important writers, their works, and influences on their societies. Cadets are provided cultural insights through literature. Discussions are conducted in Arabic and based on selected literary works ranging from early times to contemporary periods.
Arabic 430	Advanced Studies in Arabic	Fall or spring, 4th Academic Year	Language program with primary emphasis on the development of advanced Arabic comprehension skills via a variety of media. All classes will be conducted in the target language.
Arabic 440	Arabic Semester Abroad/Exchange Preparation	Spring, 4 <sup>th</sup> Academic Year	This course will prepare cadets linguistically and culturally for participation in Cadet Semester Study Abroad Program (CSSAP) or Cadet Semester Exchange Abroad Program (CSEAP).
Arabic 495	Special Topics	To be determined	Selected topics in Arabic.
Arabic 499	Independent Study	Fall or spring, 4th Academic Year	Guided by the tutor, cadets will conduct individual study or research on Arabic. Topic or area of study/research must be approved by the department head.

## 2.4 The teaching formats

There are three types of language teaching formats at USAFA such as classroom teaching, independent study or research, and experiencing in authentic contexts. Most courses are conducted in classrooms since classroom teaching is the basic approach, especially for the lower-level cadets. For example, most classes for the first and second year cadets are held in classrooms. In class, teachers give introduction to the language, culture, and societies of a foreign language. Cadets are required to explore the relevant topics on that language before class and to make classroom discussion. Cadets are encouraged to share their opinion and communicate in the target language. What the teachers do in class is to guide the discussion and make comments on it.

Besides classroom teaching, another format is the seminar. USAFA seniors will experience a semester-long survey of the target language and are required to do the independent study or research. They can use available sources from the internet, newspapers, television, radio broadcasts, etc. to carry out their research. Though course activities are conducted in classrooms, they are in seminar format. Cadets are obliged to give oral discussion in class and assigned to write project or paper.

The third format of language teaching is immersion in authentic contexts. With various language intensive programs, USAFA cadets with a higher level performance in foreign language can apply to study abroad or travel in target countries. The reinforcement programs fall into three categories: semester-long immersion programs, such as Cadet Semester Study Abroad Program (CSSAP) or Cadet Semester Exchange Abroad Program (CSEAP); summer-period cultural immersion programs, such as CSLIP; and summer-period language scholarship programs, such as Critical Language Scholarship programs (CLS). Those who participate in CSEAP or CSSAP can study abroad at a military academy or a local university for a semester. Cadets who participate in the CSLIP will study abroad for three weeks at foreign universities for intensive study on the target language and culture. They can also apply for Tours to experience the local culture, history and language in person. Priority is given to cadets to the critical countries or regions and to cadets learning critical languages. These language programs can promote students' language acquisition, enhance their cultural awareness, and significantly improve their intercultural communication skills through their in-depth learning and experience in the real context of the target country. With immersion in authentic contexts, cadets can greatly enhance their understanding of both the target language and culture which can eventually offer benefits to their work in an international/foreign environment.

One of the outstanding characteristics of USAFA teaching is its systematic and progressive arrangement which runs through basic, intermediate and advanced levels in foreign languages learning. At the initial level, emphasis is given to knowledge of the language and culture of the target country. Cadets are encouraged to absorb diverse knowledge through reading and listening sources in target languages. With the improvement of students' language, they are encouraged to use the target language to discuss about such topics as the society and culture of a target language. The purpose at this level is to lay a language and cultural foundation through plenty of reading and listening practice. Based on their solid foundation, students will be trained to enhance their understanding of the culture and develop their intercultural communication skills. At the intermediate level, cadets broaden their horizon through reading and listening to more materials on culture, history, society and other topics in a target language. What the cadets are required to do is not only to present what they have learned in the target language, but to report what they have thought and ask questions to trigger class discussion. In advanced and intensive foreign language courses, cadets will make a deeper discussion on broader topics, including politics, economy, military, etc. through their study on the influential literary works and writers of the target countries. It aims to enhance the abilities more significant than reading, listening, speaking, and writing skills. It aims to enhance the competence of cross-cultural communication so as to prepare the cadets for their overseas immersion programs. cross-cultural competence refers to skills and knowledge that enable force personnel to adapt and operate effectively in any culture to achieve mission success, including common cultural functions that promote the effective development and use of regional expertise [4]. In other words, the goal of USAFA language teaching is to enhance cadets' understanding of target language and culture while improve their reading, listening, speaking and writing skills.

### **3. Characteristics of the Language Curriculum System**

#### **3.1 Major courses do not possess a larger proportion than core courses.**

In recent years, more and more importance is given to language education due to the policies and strategies of the US Department of Defense. In accordance with is situation, the position of language teaching at USAFA has been increased more. One typical example is that the foreign

language degree has been changed from one to eight since the class of 2013. Accordingly, all the foreign language minors at the Academy can offer their own degrees. However, this does not mean that there are more major courses than core ones or the major courses have more semester hours than the core ones. In fact, this principle is shared by all majors at USAFA. Take English majors as an example to illustrate.

Currently, the semester hours of core curriculum in English majors (including academic and physical education core courses) are 96.5, and those of major courses are no more than 45. That is to say, the former courses account for 71.2% of the total semester hours, while the latter account for 33.2% of the total (in Figure 1). It indicates that the proportion of core courses is much higher than that of the major curriculum. This curriculum structure partly reflects the USAFA's concept of holistic education<sup>[2]</sup>. Through the whole developmental education, the cadets will gain more knowledge from core courses than that from major courses<sup>[2]</sup>. In this way, cadets will lay a broader and more solid foundation in general knowledge so that they will be more flexible and adaptable in future.

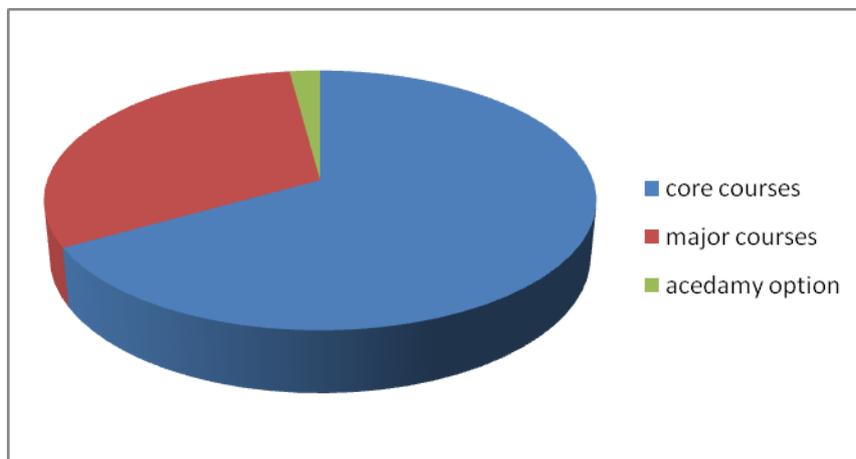


Figure 1. Semester hour proportion of Courses in English majors

### 3.2 USAFA's language teaching is carried out in accordance with a definite goal

In USAFA Institutional Outcome White Papers, the talent development objectives specify the Academy's nine goals, among which the first two being "clear communication" and "critical thinking". This is reflected in language teaching in every aspect from curriculum setting to daily education. For example, from basic to intermediate English class teaching, cadets are required to consult a large number of target language materials and make presentation in class in the target language. In addition, cadets are encouraged to make comments on the work of each other. Both 100- and 200-level English courses contribute to the development and assessment of the following outcomes: "clear communication " and "critical thinking". In advanced courses, cadets are required to conduct a broader and in-depth research in terms of various aspects such as war literature and make presentation to show their idea which usually stirs heating discussion in class. After class, cadets will be assigned to write a report or paper based on the research and discussion. In this way, cadets' abilities of clear communication and critical thinking are developed. What is more significant, their comprehensive research ability will be enhanced so that they become talented officers with high qualities. One typical example is the seminar format. For English majors, there are eleven 300-level English courses among which seminars account for 36%. And in 400-level courses, seminars account for as high as 67% of all English courses (in Figure 2). It can be seen that language teaching at USAFA always adheres to a definite goal---to cultivate cadets with "clear communication" and "critical thinking", which runs through the four-year education at this Academy.

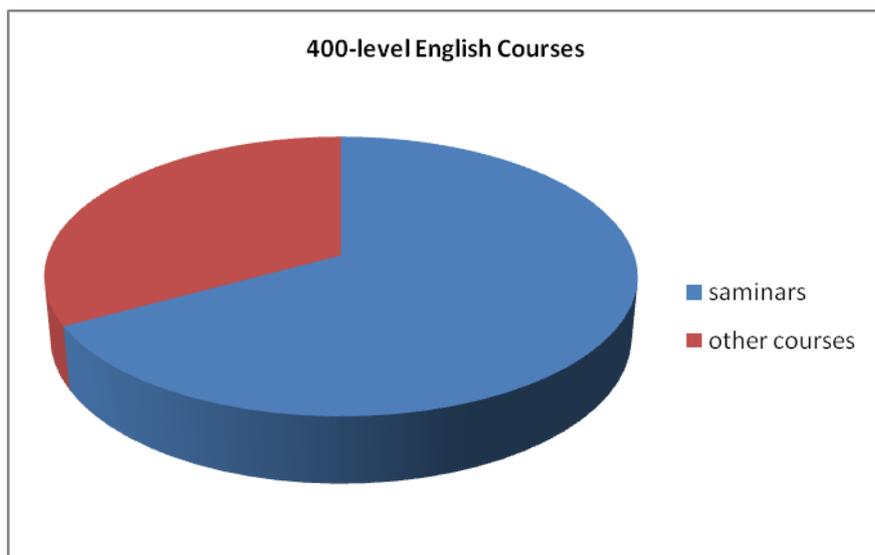


Figure 2 The Proportion of Seminars in English Majors Courses

### 3.3 It is essential for the USAFA to conduct diverse cultural programs and activities to improve cross-cultural capabilities

Just as Samuel Huntington, an American statesman, said: "In the post-Cold War era, the most important differences between peoples are no longer ideological, political or economic, but cultural."<sup>[1]</sup> That is why USAFA conducts various forms of language and culture programs. Cadets take advantage of the opportunities to study abroad in foreign military academies or local universities or travel around target countries or regions. Through the immersion experiencing, the cadets can master the implied meaning of the target language and better understand the local culture, history, society, even economy and politics. These programs can be regarded as an indispensable part of USAFA language teaching system and play a positive role in improving the cadets' language and cross-culture communication abilities. Cultivated with such capabilities, the cadets will contribute more to the United States in the future.

## 4. Reflection

Since the event of "September 11" and the following local wars conducted by the US army in foreign countries, especially in the middle east countries, the US government has realized that "the foreign language and cultural abilities of the US military personnel are astonishingly low. The knowledge and vision of their graduates are limited to the US mainland, which seriously hinders their thinking in dealing with international affairs".<sup>[1]</sup> "The United States needs more reliable communication capabilities."<sup>[1]</sup> The statement, taken from the President's Council on Foreign Languages and International Studies, explains the reason why USAFA has increasing offered various foreign language minors, and underscores the significance of foreign languages in U.S. national defense." For tens of years building, the US military academy has made remarkable achievements and accelerated rich experience in the construction of national defense language capacity. Since "the US army enjoys the fame of the world's first-class military"<sup>[3]</sup>, their performance is worth studying.

The analysis of USAFA's language curriculum system provides reflection on the reform of foreign language teaching in China's military universities and colleges. We can learn from the following aspects.

### 4.1 Types of foreign languages should be added to meet the international demands

Today, China is conducting more and more international affairs such as peacekeeping, humanitarian relief, counter-terrorism, evacuation, military exercises and so on. In these affairs, foreign languages undoubtedly play an important role. However, most military personnel cannot

carry out these tasks without interpreters<sup>[2]</sup>. This is a serious problem because it shows that the language communication ability is very poor among in the army. It also shows to a certain extent that foreign language teaching in many military academies does not effectively develop listening and speaking skills since their graduates cannot appropriately use target language to communicate. This hinders the effect of the military performance in international affairs. Accordingly, in order to change the situation and meet the international demand, China's military academies have to keep on exploring teaching approaches and activities to enhance the listening, speaking and cross-cultural communication abilities. The reform that must be conducted in foreign language teaching is to increase the types of language and dialect. At present, most military universities and colleges in China offer only a few foreign languages, namely one or two international common languages, such as English.<sup>[3]</sup> This seriously restricts students' development of their language ability and thus hinders the completion of international tasks in the future.<sup>[3]</sup> We should add types of language and culture, aiming to meet the demand of future international tasks.

#### **4.2 Curriculum configuration should be adjusted to lay a broader foundation**

The other reform is to adjust the curriculum structure. Learned from the above analysis, we infer that USAFA has a reasonable configuration in terms of her language curriculum since the proportion of core courses is twice of that of major courses. While in our country, it is just the opposite<sup>[1]</sup>. Students in our country will spend more time learning their major courses. We can not totally deny our practice but one advantage of USAFA's practice is that students can lay a broader foundation in multiple disciplines<sup>[5]</sup>. In this way, students will have profound but narrower professional knowledge, so that they are not adaptable and flexible in the future career. Therefore we can learn from the practice of USAFA and adjust the curriculum configuration to increase general education courses.

### **5. Conclusion**

USAFA has made an excellent example in language education for us to follow. Summarizing their performance and characteristics, we hope this paper will be helpful for the reform of foreign language education in China's military universities and colleges

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