

Discussion Note

Challenges and Aspirations of University Language Centres with Particular Reference to Croatia

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The recent political, social and economic changes in Europe have had a great impact on higher education, in particular with regard to foreign language teaching at universities. This has resulted in an increased need for foreign language teaching at universities especially among non-philological studies. The expansion of new language centres has been a step forward in meeting the challenges of the Bologna Process and the emerging multilingual Europe. Language centres play an important role in second language learning especially in teaching foreign languages for specific purposes. However, they have not always been on equal terms with modern language departments and other non-linguistic departments. Language centre staff are often treated with mistrust, and misconception of their work is not uncommon. Several changes need to occur to improve the status of language centres. Firstly, the teaching staff should take more initiatives in research which would ensure a better standing and a more adequate status within the higher education institution they operate in. Furthermore, universities should develop language policies to promote foreign language learning according to the European Council recommendations. This would contribute to a more harmonious cooperation between language centres and other departments at universities.

Introduction

In the last two decades, higher education in Europe has undoubtedly undergone significant changes. The collapse of communism in Eastern Europe, the impact of globalisation, the recession, as well as the implementation of the Bologna Process have accelerated transformations in tertiary education. One of the changes in higher education concerning foreign language teaching (FLT) includes higher demands for language learning across all areas of study. This can be seen as a direct consequence of the Bologna Process. At the Lisbon European Council held in March 2000, the Heads of State and Government of the Union set a major strategic goal for 2010: “to become the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world, capable of sustainable economic growth with more and better jobs and greater social cohesion” (Lisbon

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2000: 2). The European Council acknowledged the vital role played by education systems in the economic and social strategy of the Union. One of the goals of the Bologna Process is to increase the mobility of students and staff, which is not possible without achieving linguistic competence in at least one or two foreign languages. Thus, FLT has become a vital link in the chain of European integration. Although knowledge of languages had long been an implicit cornerstone of the reform, the importance of language learning in higher education was explicitly emphasised in the Berlin Declaration, which calls upon universities to provide students, regardless of their field of specialisation, with opportunities for improving their knowledge in languages (Berlin Declaration 2001). In 2003, the European Language Council launched the ENLU (European Network for the Promotion of Language Learning Among All Undergraduates) project in order to call on Higher Education Institutions (HEI) to develop their own coherent and specific language policies which would enable them to increase the range of languages offered and learned at universities (European Language Council 2005).

These new challenges have forced changes in teaching and learning of foreign languages. One of the responses to these challenges is the increasing number of university language centres across Europe. Language centres, as we know them today, came into existence during the sixties and early seventies (Aub-Buscher & Bickerton 2002; Ingram 2001), however, in those early stages they were small and they played a very limited role in the life of the university (Ruane 2003). The last decade of the 20th century with its political (the collapse of the communism), technological (computer assisted language learning) and educational (creation of the European Higher Education Area) changes has brought increased demands for second language learning, which in return triggered the expansion of language centres across European universities.

The increased growth of language centres has led to a need for more cooperation among them. As a result of an initiative of a group of enthusiastic language teachers, a confederation of independent associations from 22 countries in Europe (CercleS) was founded in Strasbourg in 1991. It has brought together some 290 language centres, departments, institutes, faculties or schools in Higher Education whose main responsibility is the teaching of foreign languages to university students. Its members have several thousand academic, administrative and technical staff, and some 250, 000 students who are learning the world's main languages (CercleS 2008). Language centres today have become a recognizable element in higher education and their role in promoting and teaching foreign languages should not be underestimated.

On the whole, however, issues such as the role, function and status of language centres remain, to some extent, ambiguous. They will be examined and discussed in the following chapters. Specific reference will be made to university language centres in Croatia.

Challenges and aspirations

University-based language centres have made a great contribution to the development of language learning since their emergence and have played a major part in the development and implementation of language policies and language education. (Ingram 2001; Ruane 2003; Grainger 2009). However, despite the increasing impact that language centres are having, there is hardly

any literature available that discusses language centres per se, that is, their nature, roles and functions (Ingram 2001; Ruane 2003).

The diversity of language centres has resulted in various definitions, functions and roles. However, some common characteristics can be identified. The main function of a language centre is to provide language education and training for non-linguistic students, that is, students not studying philology or specialising in literary and linguistic studies. It is generally agreed “that there were three types of activity common to all language centres, whatever their name or institution framework and however diverse their missions” (Aub-Buscher & Bickerton 2002: 206). These are:

- practical language training especially for learners not specialising in languages,
- the use of appropriate technology for language learning,
- research and development in the field of language teaching and learning.

The activities of a language centre are often complex and include a range of teaching methods as well as a variety of classes, such as Language for Specific Purposes (LSP), Language for Academic Purposes (LAP), Translation for Specific Purposes (TSP), or Language for General Purposes (LGP). Staff members have different skills and specializations which they can gain only through self-learning and professional development, as there are no philology departments that prepare students for teaching of LSP.

With regard to the third function, the founding group of CercleS emphasised the importance of research in the mission of language centres. Language centre staff should make a specific contribution to the development of research in language learning. A strong research agenda and profile are also important to warrant the status and standing of language centres in universities. This issue of research is central and it permeates most discussions about the role of language centres.

The Wulkow Memorandum also emphasizes the importance of research and development in the area of language learning and teaching. In January 2009 a working party of directors from twenty-seven language centres, representing universities from thirteen countries in Europe, met in Wulkow/Brandenburg (Germany) to discuss and define the strategic role of Language Centres at Higher Education Institutions in the process of internationalisation of Higher Education in Europe. It was concluded that language centres at higher education institutions are recognized as a major player in the development and delivery of effective internationalisation strategies throughout the European HE sector. Moreover, they actively contribute to the successful implementation of key aspects of the Bologna Process by providing the linguistic and intercultural tools for effective mobility (Grainger 2009).

However, this important role of language centres has not been acknowledged by all the participants in higher education arena. In the keynote address to the CercleS conference in Dresden in 1996, Hans Joachim Meyer talked about “the misconception of the function of language teaching in academic education and consequently of the function of language centres at universities” (Meyer 1997: 6). He referred to language centres as “the unloved poor cousin” who frequently find themselves under the “tutelage of the philologies” (Meyer 1997: 10-11). Many staff working in language centres complain that their work is perceived to be marginal to the main business of teaching language and literature in the university. Tension between centres and philological departments is not

uncommon and, for reasons of academic structure, they often lack control over decision-making. Language centres should not end up being “an appendix or an extension of philological departments, nor should they be considered exclusively as services departments” (Meyer 1997: 11). In England, for example, the Worton Review (2009) has reported a perceived strain in the relationship between academic departments of modern languages and language centres. The report describes the relationship between language centres and the modern language departments as “often an uneasy one, with the Language Centres often being perceived by the MFL Departments as mere service providers of ‘everyday’ language learning” (Worton 2009: para. 135). Some of the respondents to Worton’s questionnaire went so far as to express anxiety to the extent where language centres were considered a threat to the status of the academic departments. These tensions may have their roots in the lack of understanding of the work that language centres perform (Worton 2009; Meyer 1997; Ruane 2003).

In addition, the status of language centres is not always clearly defined within HEIs, which can lead to further misconceptions. Many teaching staff have been given part-time and short-term contracts, and their conditions of work in some institutions may be perceived as second-class. Often there is insufficient office space, inadequate classrooms and teaching aids, and lack of benefits that other departments enjoy. These conditions are often related to the way language centres are financed. Regrettably, the innovative work and achievements in language teaching are not always adequately recognized by senior management teams and financial decision-makers, which often results in under-funding of language centres. Moreover, the teaching staff are sometimes categorized as non-academic ‘teaching fellows’ or ‘tutors’, labels which can be used to separate them from ‘lecturers’ and reinforce a lower status. All these circumstances have contributed to misconceptions of the role of language centres at universities.

This is one of the reasons why a strong research agenda and profile are important to ensure the status of language centres in universities. The issue of research is crucial for further development of language centres and their capability of being fully integrated into a university environment. All faculties, departments or units at tertiary level must give significant priority to research and the advancement of expertise, thus, language centres should be no exception. However, language centres are not as research active as they should be, even though there are many areas of research such as, language learning in specific contexts, language learning motivation, teaching and learning methods, socio-cultural approaches to language learning, or technology-based learning, (which are suitable for language centre staff). However, identifying the research agenda is not enough, “a more structured approach to creating the appropriate conditions for research in the language centre environment” is needed (Ruane 2003: para. 50).

One of the prerequisites for creating the appropriate conditions for research is the language policy of the higher institution in which the language centre operates. Discussing language policy in higher education Sjur Bergan notes that “higher education institutions have an important role to play both in developing students’ knowledge of their native language(s) and in promoting knowledge of foreign languages, and the range of language courses offered [...]” (Bergan 2002: 18). Language policies are clearly important in the wider context of higher education policies.

Unfortunately, many tertiary institutions have no language policy whatsoever, or do not have a conclusive language policy. Under the auspices of the European Language Council (ELC), an Interest Group on Language Policy in Universities in Europe conducted a pilot survey in 2002/2003, to obtain information on the current situation concerning language policy among universities in Europe. There were 21 institutions from 12 EU countries that participated in the survey. Out of 21 institutions only 3 had developed a language policy (Chambers 2003). In 2004 other research in this area was conducted in Ireland by Jenny Bruen. Eleven higher education institutions were surveyed, however, only eight responded, out of which only one had a language policy in place, while another expressed an intention to develop such a policy in the future (Bruen 2004). From the surveys conducted to date, it is clear that not many universities have a language policy. But, as Bergan says, "it may be worth bearing in mind that not having a language policy is also a policy" (Bergan 2002: 5).

Language centres in Croatian universities

The first origins of a language centre in Croatia can be traced back to 1979 when the Institute of Phonetics at the Faculty of Philosophy (University of Zagreb) was divided into the Centre for Foreign Languages and Speech Problems, and the Centre for Language Teaching. The Centre for Language Teaching conducted LSP courses within its faculty and in other faculties at the University of Zagreb. In 2002 both centres merged into the Centre for Foreign Languages. Since then, the Centre has been offering two types of courses: LSP and LAP courses for students, and LGP courses for the general public. LSP courses are obligatory for the first year non-language major students of the Faculty of Philosophy. The students may choose one of the following languages: English, German, Italian, French, Spanish or Russian. The second year students may continue with an LSP course or enrol an optional language course for beginners. LGP courses for the general public are offered in 12 languages (English, German, Italian, French, Spanish, Swedish, Dutch, Portuguese, Russian, Arab, Slovene and Greek).

The second language centre in Croatia was founded in 2006 at the University of Zadar. In order to meet the higher education requirements stipulated by the Bologna Process in terms of foreign language teaching, the senior management of the University decided to form a foreign language centre. Thus, in 2006 the Centre for Foreign Languages (CFL) was founded. However, the foundation of the CFL did not go as smoothly as one would expect. It faced strong opposition from philology departments, except from the Department of English and Slavic Languages. Moreover, some non-linguistic departments opposed the foundation of the CFL. Arguments presented against the foundation of CFL were rather of an emotional and subjective nature. For instance, the philology departments were offering optional LGP courses to students of non-linguistic departments at that time, so they were afraid they would lose those optional courses, which had only been a burden for them anyway. Other participants questioned the professionalism and ability of the CFL staff to create and run language programmes, while other objections, however groundless, were related to legal matters.

Finally, at the Senate meeting, the governing body of the University voted by a narrow margin to approve the CFL, with 11 votes for and 10 against. Due to strong opposition from the philology departments, the CFL managed to provide

only three LSP courses in English and one LGP course in Russian and Croatian in its first year. Today, five years after the initiation of the CFL, the Centre offers 76 LSP courses in English, French and German; 52 LGP courses in Croatian, English, French, German, Korean, Mandarin, Russian and Spanish; 24 TSP courses in English, French and German which makes 152 courses in total. Courses are held based on the number of students enrolled in each subject. This winter semester, for example, 1162 students attended 32 courses (21 LSP, 10 LGP and 1 TSP) in seven languages: Croatian (for exchange students), English, French, German, Korean, Russian and Spanish.

The most popular LSP is English, which has 896 students enrolled in 20 different courses and various groups, while German for Specific Purposes has only 16 students in two courses. The CFL offers French for Specific Purposes as well, but there have not been enough students enrolled to run the course. There are two reasons for such a disproportion in opting for LSP courses. First, some departments (Psychology, Librarianship and Maritime Transport) specifically require from their students to take an English for Specific Purposes course. Second, there are not many students who have acquired skills in other language than English during their secondary education. The trendiest LGP is Spanish having 105 enrolled students, followed by French with 45 students, then Russian 41, German 29, Korean 21, and Croatian having only 9 (exchange) students.

Although the University of Zadar has provided language learning opportunities for students by setting up the CFL, not all departments have taken advantage of what it offers; in fact, some departments do not require a foreign language course in their studies at all. Out of 22 departments only four require an LSP course in all six semesters of undergraduate programme (see Table 1), and only one department (Librarianship) is considering introducing the second foreign language as compulsory in the academic year 2011/2012.

A recent survey conducted on 143 departments (philology departments were excluded from the survey) at five universities in Croatia shows that 31% of the departments do not offer LSP to their students at all (Poljaković & Martinović 2009). This means that in the first year approximately 0.7 foreign languages are learned per student. In the second and third year 70% of the departments do not require a foreign language course. This means that in the second and third year only 0.3 foreign languages are learned per student (Poljaković & Martinović 2009). This is far from the 1+2 languages (mother tongue plus two foreign languages) recommendation by the European Council.

The situation at the University of Zadar is slightly better (0.5 foreign languages learned per student in all semesters) than in Croatian universities in general. The CFL has clearly contributed to the increase of language courses offered and number of students taking those courses. However, departments carry the main responsibility in creating and implementing a foreign language policy within their field of study. As can be seen from Table 1, various departments have attached varying degrees of importance to foreign language learning. A coherent language policy at the university level would assist the departments in making their language policy decisions. As long as each department is creating its own policy on foreign language teaching, those important decisions will basically depend upon the heads of departments and their personal preferences. This is a good reason why senior management at universities should propose and establish a common language policy in accordance with the Bologna Process and its requirements in terms of foreign

Table 1. LSP at the University of Zadar

Nr.	Department	LSP in 2010/2011	
		Hours lectures+seminars+exercises	ECTS credit allocation per semester
1.	Agriculture	2 + 0 + 2 (I, II)	4
2.	Archaeology	1 + 1 + 0 (I)	3
3.	Economics	2 + 0 + 1 (I, II)	3
4.	English Language and Literature		
5.	Ethnology and Anthropology	1 + 0 + 1 (I-IV)	2
6.	Philosophy	1 + 0 + 1 (I)	2
7.	French Language and Literature		
8.	Geography – Teacher Education	1 + 0 + 1 (I - II)	2
	Geography – Research	1 + 0 + 1 (I - VI)	2
9.	Information and Communication Technology	0.8 + 0 + 2.2 (I - IV)	4
		0.5 + 0.5 + 1 (V, VI)	3
10.	Classical Philology		
11.	Librarianship	1 + 0 + 1 (I - VI)	2
12.	Croatian and Slavonic Studies		
13.	German Language and Literature		
14.	Pedagogy		
15.	History	1 + 0 + 1 (I - VI)	2
16.	History of Art	1 + 0 + 1 (I - II)	2
17.	Maritime Transport	2 + 0 + 2 (I - II)	4
	Engineering	1 + 0 + 1 (III - VI)	2
	Maritime Transport Nautical Science	2 + 0 + 2 (I - II)	4
		1 + 0 + 1 (III - IV)	2
18.	Nursing	1 + 0 + 1 (I - IV)	2
19.	Psychology	1 + 0 + 1 (I - IV)	2
20.	Sociology		
21.	Italian Language and Literature		
22.	Teacher Education	1 + 0 + 1 (I,II,IV,V)	2

* Roman numerals in brackets indicate the semesters in which LSP is compulsory.

language learning. Departments cannot expect students to improve their language skills, to consult foreign literature, or to take part in exchange programmes unless they are given opportunities to further improve their language skills which they acquired during primary and secondary education. Regardless of the field of study that students are engaged in, they need to be prepared for the evolving multilingual Europe.

Conclusion

There is no doubt that language centres in higher education play a significant role in second and foreign language learning, in particular with regard to teaching specific language skills to students of non-linguistic majors. Despite

their important role, it is evident that language centres have often been treated with disrespect and certain mistrust. Furthermore, the work of language centres has been perceived as non-academic by some colleagues. One of the reasons for this perception may be due to their relatively modest involvement in scientific research activities. Therefore, a strong research agenda and profile are important to ensure the status and standing of language centres in universities. In addition, language centres would benefit from coherent language policies that need to be implemented by institutions they operate in. Concerted efforts need to be undertaken to persuade political decision-makers and educational authorities in the field of languages to develop a foreign language policy, which should reflect the spirit of the Bologna Process. Nevertheless, more studies need to be undertaken in this area. Further investigations of the role, function, scope and status of language centres in higher education will contribute to a more harmonious cooperation between language centres on one side, and modern language and non-linguistic departments on the other.

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