Apples – Journal of Applied Language Studies
Vol. 5, 2 , 2011, 45–50

Discussion Note

University Language Centres in Finland – Role and Challenges

Ulla-Kristiina Tuomi, University of Helsinki &
Heidi Rontu, Aalto University

The present article examines university language centres in Finland, their current role, and the challenges they face. The aim is to provide a point of comparison to Ivan Poljaković's article on language centres in European higher education. In Finland, the framework and basic functions of university language centres are well defined by legislation and long-standing practices within the universities. The strategic planning of language studies in Finnish higher education takes place on the European, national, university and language centre levels. In this process, the language centres have their own roles and responsibilities. It is also important that the centres define their particular identity and status in relation to their basic tasks. Due to their multidisciplinary nature, involving several languages and various fields, today's language centres foster and promote interdisciplinary scholarship and research in language pedagogy. Defining the role and tasks of a language centre entails defining the kind of research best suited to its strategy and goals. Pedagogical expertise is a salient characteristic of Finnish language centres, distinguishing them from many academic fields and departments. By employing a well-conceived recruitment policy resulting in a highly professional faculty, Finnish language centres can establish a strong identity and can benefit greatly from internal expertise and know-how. In addition, active cooperation is undertaken both internally and with outside partners, for example national (FINELC) and international (CERCLES) networks. Finally, the concept of integration in language centre teaching is central. For language centres in general, the practice of integrated teaching would be an effective way of promoting their expertise and enhancing their visibility.

Introduction

In a thought-provoking article on the challenges faced by all European university language centres, and particularly those in Croatia, Ivan Poljaković discusses the current status of foreign-language teaching in higher education institutions in Europe, especially language instruction provided for non-

Corresponding authors' email: ulla-kristiina.tuomi@helsinki.fi

ISSN: 1457-9863
Publisher: Centre for Applied Language Studies, University of Jyväskylä

http://apples.jyu.fi

philology students. The analysis probably also reflects his own quite recent experience of establishing a new language centre in Croatia.

Poljaković highlights the need and importance of language skills with respect to the current political, social and economic changes in Europe called for by globalisation, international competition and economic growth. He argues that while language centres have been set up to provide the language training needed, their very role and status within universities remains ambiguous and "second-rate". To set things right, he claims, language centres must focus more on research, which would warrant them equal status with other university departments, especially those of modern languages. Similarly, universities should develop their language policies to promote foreign-language learning in general, thus supporting the work and contribution of language centres in all degree studies.

The following article provides a point of comparison to the situation in Croatia, illustrating several historical similarities, but also challenging some of Poljaković's views.

University language centres in Finland

Framework

To receive a degree in Finland, all university students must complete compulsory language studies in both national languages (Finnish and Swedish) and at least one foreign language. This requirement is stipulated by the University Act, and cannot be altered by any university. Students can include optional language courses as well, and many of them do, thus raising their "market value" vis-à-vis recruitment. Increased internationalisation and mobility not only in higher education but also in the labour market is a strong motivating factor for students to improve their language skills.

The first university language centres in Finland were founded in the 1970s to carry out the task of providing the required language courses. Focussed and coordinated cooperation, especially in materials production and teacher training, was characteristic of Finnish language centres from the very beginning. Since then, the provision of instruction in different languages, as well as types of courses and related services, has increased considerably. At present, all universities offer their language studies through a language centre or similar institute. In Finland, higher education is financed by the state, with no fees for students. Language courses in degree studies are likewise free of charge.

The Ministry of Education and Culture expects all universities to formulate their own language policies. Many of them have already done so (for example, Aalto University, University of Helsinki, University of Jyväskylä, Åbo Akademi University), since this is in the interest of the universities when facing the many challenges of internationalisation. These language policies may differ between universities; they touch upon varying issues, and the inclusion and level of concrete measures also varies. However, one concern is probably shared by all: assessing the role of programmes taught in English (for example, how to ascertain the quality of English-medium instruction) and the provision of language instruction for international students in general (particularly in academic English and in the native languages of Finland). Another important

concern, regarding language policies, is the realisation of multilingualism. The growing use of English has a major impact on other foreign languages, as well as on the national languages.

National funding of higher education institutions, as well as allocation of resources within universities, obviously have an important impact on the working conditions of the language centres, too. It is not uncommon in Finland either that the provision of language instruction has suffered from cuts in finances, despite overt claims towards internationalisation.

Overall, the framework and basic functions of Finnish university language centres are well defined by legislation and long-standing practices within the universities. Defining and redefining the functions and tasks further, then, is left to the expertise of the language centres themselves.

Active participation

The strategic planning of language studies in Finnish higher education takes place on four levels: European, national, university and language centre. It is most important for language centres themselves to remember their own roles and responsibilities in this process. It seems that at times language centres either assume an overly dependent role, expecting orders and recommendations from above, or act as solo players, showing little interest or initiative with respect to the emerging needs of the university or of society as a whole. It is reasonable to expect, we feel, that an expert institution such as a language centre fully and vigorously offer its expertise for the use of the university, and actively participate in the formulation of the university's (language) policies and practices. The same applies to participating in the formulation of national language policies and internationalisation strategies. This of course means that a language centre must constantly evaluate and update its own functions, and proactively develop those areas that are expected to become essential to the university. Flexibility and cooperation are key elements in this endeavour.

History revisited

In Poljaković's description of the Croatian situation we discern a clear sense of déjà vu with respect to the history of Finnish university language centres. In a similar fashion, Finnish language centres have had their inferiority complexes (and sometimes still do); that is to say, feelings of being victimised by the circumstances, and of not being sufficiently understood, supported and appreciated by the university community. We would describe this as "teething problems", inevitable but temporary. Respect can be earned not by pleading or complaining, but through initiative, action and quality. Still, it is worth remembering that other university departments, too, even well-established ones, can have similar feelings about their status and worth.

Identity

Language centres in general should, in our opinion, define their own identity or status not so much in relation to some other entity – for example, another university department – but in relation to the basic tasks of the language centres themselves, and in so doing, rely on their own expertise, as well as their ability

to learn and develop. The sense of worth grows from within, and cannot be gained through comparisons with other, more or perhaps less "worthy" parties. The same applies, of course, to other university departments or any institution for that matter. Bearing this in mind, Poljaković's solution to helping the "unloved poor cousin", namely focusing on research as a means of raising the academic status of language centres, is certainly acceptable, but for the wrong reasons. Research should be one of the basic functions of all language centres, not as a means of gaining academic credibility or status, but as a tool for developing their expertise and increasing their knowledge of the whole field of language teaching. Defining a language centre's role and tasks also entails defining the nature of research best suited to it in order to better attain the desired goals and serve the academic community itself.

Pedagogical development and cooperation

Pedagogical development

Research as one of the basic functions of language centres should primarily have pedagogical development as its main target, in line with another of language centres' basic functions, teaching. Because of their multidisciplinary nature involving several languages and fields, today's language centres foster and promote interdisciplinary scholarship and research in the teaching and learning of languages. This multidisciplinarity creates an ideal forum for collaboration in research and materials development to enhance teaching and learning; further, it is actually something fairly unique in the university context, and deserves to be properly addressed and applied in pedagogical development. The historically high disciplinary barriers, for example between different philologies or linguistic fields, should be easy to transcend.

On the whole, instead of providing basic pedagogical skills and knowledge for teachers, pedagogical development in language centres is usually carried out on a more advanced level. This is a particularly salient characteristic of Finnish language centres, one which clearly distinguishes them from other academic institutions or departments. In the language centres, pedagogical expertise is effectively achieved by recruitment criteria where pedagogical studies, teacher training and a degree in the language being taught are seen as threshold merits. In Finnish language centres, the level of required expertise has continuously increased since the early days when one of the main recruitment criteria could be simply native competence in a language, for example. By employing a well-conceived recruitment policy, resulting in a highly professional faculty, Finnish language centres can establish a strong identity as well as draw on abundant internal expertise and know-how.

Cooperation

Language centres in general cannot afford to ignore or underestimate the importance of cooperation. Cooperation is needed internally and with outside partners. Firstly, the language centres benefit from having a shared understanding of their primary tasks and thus a strong mutual identity. For this, national (e.g. FINELC in Finland) and international (CERCLES) networks are

central. These networks are also valuable for quality assurance work, such as benchmarking projects. Secondly, for effective pedagogical development, both internal and external collaboration is necessary; multidisciplinary collaboration within language centres is to be encouraged, in addition to active interfacing with the latest research on language and communication pedagogy. Furthermore, cooperation with partners in the university provides inspiration and ideas for pedagogical development. Cooperation can also be helpful in defining and refining the pedagogical development that is needed in a particular field or subject area.

Finally, and based on the Finnish experience, close contact with working life is vital. An understanding of job markets and work prospects is important for pedagogical development. Moreover, an understanding of working life is a valuable asset in internal discussions about the position and role of language centres in universities as well as in development work for degree studies. In this regard, language centres could adopt a stronger role as a link between the needs and requirements of working life and how these needs are addressed in academic studies.

Integrated teaching

In Finland, the concept of integration in language centre teaching is reflected in various ways, of which one is the level of language studies as an integrated part of degree work. This integration is manifested with respect to when and where in the degree programme language instruction is placed, to best support academic studies. At another level, the thematic content and skills definitions of language studies are based on, and integrated with, the academic fields and subject areas of the degree studies and/or specific needs of the degree programmes. This integration also creates new challenges for the language centres in teaching and assessing the required language skills (for instance, the concept of out-of-classroom learning; see Pitkänen et al. 2011).

At yet another level, the combining of subject and language studies in integrated teaching is a good example of how cooperation with other university departments is effectively implemented. Requiring intensive contact between language teachers and teachers of other subjects, it is a valuable learning process for everyone involved. Furthermore, integrated teaching emphasises the pragmatics of language centre teaching in an effective way. For language teachers, integrated teaching offers the possibility of an online needs analysis of the required language skills as well as of the challenges students face in meeting these requirements. For students, integrated teaching is usually highly motivating, as they gain practical insight into how their language skills can be improved. Finally, for language centres, integrated teaching is a useful way of promoting their expertise and enhancing their visibility.

Conclusion

Language centres in Finland have their own unique task of providing the required language skills for university graduates, not only to help them complete their degrees but also to prepare them for their future professions. The best way to develop any language centre is to concentrate on this task and any

related needs that the university may encounter. The high quality of work done in language centres today speaks for itself, and involving students and the whole university community in the development process is, we feel, the best way to enhance the image and recognition of the centres. All language centre staff share equal responsibility in this endeavour. Focussing on one's strengths and developing them further thus renders any considerations of an academic "pecking order" trivial and in fact counterproductive.

References

Pitkänen, Kari K., Jokinen, Jaana, Karjalainen, Sinikka, Karlsson, Leena, Lehtonen, Tuula, Matilainen, Mirjami, Niedling, Christian & Siddall, Roy (eds.) 2011. *Out-of-classroom language learning*. The University of Helsinki Language Centre Publications 2. (Available at https://helda.helsinki.fi/handle/10138/25854.)