

What does it mean to be a Language Centre? A Report of the AULC 2017 Annual Conference

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There are two ways in which a language can be offered by a University: through a degree awarding programme or as a co-curricular class or course. The origin of most university language centres in the UK is as the home of co-curricular language provision. Given that one healthy facet of life is that society is dynamic, when the external context in which universities exist change, language centres within universities also change. An interesting feature of the recent annual conference of the Association of University Language Centres (AULC) was to see the diversity of what constitutes a Language Centre in 2017, causing me to ponder what it means to be a Language Centre.

The majority of the delegates and papers at the AULC conference came from members of institution wide language provision (IWLP) programmes, i.e. co-curricular language classes. IWLP programmes in the UK typically provide classes in European languages and the dominant global languages, such as Chinese and Arabic, and in some institutions languages which meet the needs of the local community, e.g. Punjabi. There was also some representation from degree-awarding programmes at the AULC. This is only natural as most concerns amongst language teachers will transcend whether or not the class carries credits.

But perhaps because of the origins of language centres in the UK, the inclusion of the wider MFL constituency was underrepresented. In a similar vein, there were few delegates who teach English. That said, one of three invited keynote speakers was English-oriented, Libor Štěpánek, from Masaryk University in the Czech Republic, where English is taught as a foreign language. Notably absent was representation from English units in the UK. It is not the case that there were no UK-based English teachers present, but given the volume of English for Academic Purposes teaching that takes place in UK universities, the absence was stark.

Discussions with members of the AULC Executive indicated that the AULC sees its primary concern as the teaching of languages within IWLP contexts in the UK, despite the aims given on the AULC website which indicate a wider orientation to 'encourage and foster good practice and innovation in language learning and teaching' without any indication that any language or language teaching context is not included (<http://www.aulc.org/aims.html> [accessed 23 January 2017]). And indeed, it was also clear from both papers given and discussions that took place during the conference, that the AULC including the Executive, would not want to exclude any language or language professional.

The importance of an organization like the AULC cannot be overstated given the current political climate, and the difficulties facing Modern Foreign Languages (MFL) in the UK (Paton 2013). One positive development despite the current political shift to look inward is that IWLP programmes are growing nationally (UCML-AULC Survey 2015, p. 7). However, pondering what it means to be a language centre left me thinking that there is much to be gained if there was more of a direct linking up of the teaching of English and the teaching of other languages. It is an unfortunate reality that in terms of academic discipline MFL and EFL are largely distinct from each other. I would argue that it is in language centres where

this divide should be overtly challenged. The genuine openness of the AULC indicates support at the national level for any language centre wanting to challenge this divide.

Consideration of the theme of the AULC conference illustrates the artifice of the EL-FL divide. Under the theme, *The Multilingual University: Inspiring Teachers, Transforming Learners*, the papers given and issues discussed largely transcended the boundaries of particular languages and whether they were being offered on courses as part of a degree or not. The AULC annual conference was hosted by Queens University Belfast, 12-13 January 2017. There were 3 invited keynote speakers, 20 talks in four parallel sessions, and time given to the four AULC Special Interest Groups: Professional Development, Teaching & Learning Support, Language for Specific Purposes and Management.

There was strong participation from the University of Leeds, with contributions by colleagues whose primary remit is in IWLP (i.e. Languages for All), MFL, and EL.

Specifically, the following talks were given:

- Caroline Campbell, Using student-centred assessment to inspire learners and evidence their learning
- Patrizia Lavizani, The Italian Digital Project
- Juan Muñoz López & María García Florenciano, Authentic Materials and real tasks, Enhancing students' employability, intercultural Awareness and communicative competence
- Carolin Schneider & Melinda Whong, Developing Co-curricular Language Learning Activities

There is every reason why language centres should be the hub for the teaching and learning of all languages. Whether that's the teaching of Thai, Arabic, German or English, the vast majority of concerns that teachers have in their classrooms with their learners are

common to all and would thus benefit from a cross-language approach to language teaching.

References

Paton, G. (2013). A-level results 2013: foreign language courses in 'freefall'. *The Telegraph*. 15 August 2013. <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/education/educationnews/10245143/A-level-results-2013-foreign-language-courses-in-freefall.html> [accessed 23 January 2017].

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