Now and Then in University Language Centres: Reflections From Past to Present Experiences With a View to Embracing Future Research Practices in Language Learning and Teaching

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Abstract

This paper provides an overview of a presentation delivered at a lively seminar[1] in which language professionals shared ideas worth spreading about the concept of bridging the research-practice gap at University Language Centres. The paper addresses a wide range of topics, revealing the daily liveliness of Language Centres and the energy they transmit to national and international academic communities. As an in-depth follow-up, it presents a collection of outcomes derived from best practices that foster creativity and activate diverse linguistic and cultural dynamics for the benefit of the university context. The dual aim of the paper is to highlight the central role that university Language Centres play in the field of language learning, and to illustrate the positive outcomes they both gain from and contribute to through participation in national and European associations. Specifically, it includes: a) a reflection on pedagogical concepts and approaches that developed over time and naturally integrated with one another, b) an overview of ideas aimed at creating integration between classroom activities and research methodologies, c) short reports on everyday professional experiences shared by staff working in a Language Centre, d) a brief outline of the support provided by the Italian national Association (AICLU) and the European Confederation of University Language Centres (CercleS). Possible actions that can help bridge the gap between theory and practice, researching while teaching or teaching while researching, are suggested. This perspective can strengthen and

1 Teacher Researchers and Researcher Teachers: Bridging the Research-Practice Gap at University Language Centers. Libera Università di Bolzano, 25 October 2024. The author wishes to gratefully acknowledge the whole Staff of the University Language Centre, for the organization of a stimulating and culturally enriching Seminar.

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empower a mission for the future since "the progress of language teaching and learning at university depends on research for validation, the avoidance of fossilization, and equality of esteem" (Little, 2020).

1. Introduction

Since the early 2000s, University Language Centres have gradually become a key institution within the academic context based on multifaceted objectives. This process unveiled the ever-growing need for multilanguage learning, intercultural experiences, exchanges of knowledge and best practices within the Higher Education dimension. Professionals who decided to join this incredibly dynamic reality found themselves involved in several tasks that would include teaching, language material development, test development and assessment, tutoring, project planning and working, supporting the innumerable international agreements with other universities and students' mobility programs that academic contexts constantly pursue. Added to this are the daily actions of meeting students, encouraging them towards accurate language learning, supporting their weaknesses and enhancing their strengths, training them for autonomous learning that would encourage them to switch their knowledge from an academic curriculum perspective to lifelong learning. The list of tasks could even be longer. In other words, a University Language Centre can be very demanding for all the professionals who work there. No matter the role! Leaders, teachers, tutors, technical and administrative personnel are all called upon to perform a wealth of tasks that very often embrace the whole academic community and beyond. Seen from a personal perspective, one core factor explains why many Language Centre professionals are willing to sustain such an intense workload: passion! This driving force sustains long-term commitment and innovation in everyday practice, yet it is rarely acknowledged or adequately valued within academic communities. This observation raises crucial questions that lie at the heart of the Language Centre mission: when do practitioners have the time to pause and reflect on their practices, and how can such reflection, grounded in experience and informed by research, be transformed into more effective support for students and the wider academic community? How can academic gov-

ernance be made aware that beyond the demands of meticulous daily work, many Language Centre staff both need and aspire to engage in research, explore new ideas, and develop practices grounded in their findings? Indeed, within the internal scenario, such an approach would be fully consistent with the national guidelines of the Italian Ministry of University and Research and aligned with the standards of academic quality promoted by Italian universities. Substantial support in this direction is provided by national associations which, across many European countries, have fostered networks of Language Centres. These networks have, in turn, enabled the creation of a broader confederation, CercleS[2], strengthening collaboration and shared academic identity at the European level. At this stage, it becomes essential to consider what has been achieved so far, not only to document progress but also to identify directions for future action and sustainable development.

Based on these considerations, the paper opens with a brief humanistic reflection intended to frame the discussion within a broader understanding of the social and personal dimensions that underpin the topic. It then proceeds through several interconnected components. First, it traces the development of educational concepts that have evolved in time, highlighting shifts in theoretical perspectives and their implications for current research. Following this, the paper outlines the methodological approaches employed, with particular attention to the frameworks, techniques and analytical strategies that may guide professionals involved in these actions. The discussion then moves from the educational context of the classroom to the domain of research, illustrating how pedagogical experiences can inform and enrich the community working in a Language Centre. The paper develops by presenting insights into the experiences of language professionals, drawing on narratives and reflections gathered from peers to give voice to the everyday realities of these lively environments. Finally, the paper explores possible actions that can help bridge the research–practice gap in university Language Centres, and suggests ways of integrating research and teaching through reflective, practice-based inquiry.

2 European Confederation of Language Centres in Higher Education, https://cercles.org

2. The Professional Context: Believe in Your Potential

In this section, we briefly explore the professional identities of Language Centre practitioners and the roles they play within the language-learning community, with particular attention to how these identities are shaped through practice, reflection, and participation in communities of practice. An understanding of these professional identities also encourages us to consider the underlying beliefs and values that drive daily practice. The notion that potential is always close at hand suggests that growth is not an abstract ideal, but something embedded in our everyday practice. Belief in one's potential, therefore, should not be seen as a form of optimism; rather, it reflects an awareness that meaningful change often begins with small, familiar actions that cumulatively shape both professional development and the learning environment. One such actions is the simple act of looking back at one's own work. Retrospective reflection constitutes a form of inquiry in itself as it helps reveal patterns, uncover underlying assumptions, and open up possibilities for new directions. However, despite its recognized value, reflective practice is rarely practiced. Professionals often move swiftly from one task to the next, leaving little time to revisit past actions, to understand the rationale behind specific choices, or to consider how these experiences might inform future research or teaching practices. Acknowledging the reflective potential of past work is a crucial first step toward transforming it into a meaningful resource for ongoing professional development.

At the same time, developing self-confidence in daily professional practices requires an awareness of the scholarly work dedicated to the study of language learning and teaching processes. This leads to a central question that invites us to reflect on *what theoretical background is necessary to become fully aware of the pedagogical choices that can be effectively and meaningfully implemented in language classes*. The following section addresses this question by offering an overview of key studies that have emerged over time and have progressively shaped the pedagogical framework underpinning modern language instruction.

3. The Pedagogical Concepts

3.1 Old Beliefs vs New Pedagogical Perspectives

From the late 1960s onwards, dissatisfaction with formal, structure-based syllabuses led to a rethinking of how language should be conceptualized and taught. Traditional syllabuses focused primarily on textual knowledge, treating language as a fixed system of grammatical forms to be mastered in sequence. However, this view was increasingly challenged by theoretical developments that emphasized the creativity, variability, and social nature of language use**.**

A major catalyst for change was Chomsky's (1957) emphasis on the *creative and unique nature of individual language use*, which challenged behaviourist models of language learning. Although Chomsky's focus remained largely formal, his ideas stimulated broader interpretations of language competence. From this intellectual climate emerged the Functional–Communicative approach which, from the mid-1970s, offered a clear alternative to formal syllabuses, placing emphasis on ideational and interpersonal meaning rather than grammatical form alone. Influenced strongly by the Council of Europe (1975), this approach sought to align language teaching with *learners' real-world communicative needs*. The work of Wilkins (1976), with his notional-functional syllabus, was particularly influential in organizing language around communicative functions and notions. Moreover, contributions from scholars such as Candlin (1967), Widdowson (1978), Munby (1978), Brumfit and Johnson (1979), Morrow (1981), Johnson (1982), Rivers (1983) and Larsen-Freeman (1986) further consolidated the view of language as a tool for meaningful interaction and paved the way towards the broader framework of *Communicative Language Teaching.*

However, despite this significant shift toward meaning and use, functional–communicative syllabuses soon showed some weaknesses since they seemed to underrepresent the dynamic nature of learning itself. They often struggled to fully integrate *discourse, genre, pragmatics, identity, and social participation*. This recognition set the stage for later developments—such as discourse-based, genre-based, and sociocultural approaches—which seek to *reconcile form, meaning, use, and learning process* within broader social and institutional contexts. At the same time, research into language in use high-

lighted that effective communication requires more than functional ability. Indeed, it requires socially appropriate language. Studies in functional linguistics (Firth, 1957; Halliday, 1973, 1978) emphasized the inseparability of language, context, and meaning, while sociolinguistics, particularly Hymes' (1972, 1974) concept of communicative competence, stressed the importance of knowing how language choices vary according to social roles, relationships, and cultural norms. Later work in genre analysis (Swales, 1981) demonstrated how communication is shaped by recurring social purposes within specific discourse communities.

3.2 The Need for Interactive Approaches and Comprehensive Syllabuses

Even with these advances, early communicative and functional approaches often fragmented language use, genre knowledge was insufficiently integrated into syllabuses, and social appropriateness proved difficult to operationalize and assess. These limitations ultimately pointed toward the need for more integrated models of syllabus design (Argondizzo, 2001), paving the way for *task-based*, *discourse-based*, and *sociocultural approaches* that sought to reconcile form, meaning, use, and learning process within authentic social contexts. Consequently, several context-sensitive syllabus types emerged. The *situational* and *topic-based approaches* emphasized the contexts and situations in which language is required, focusing on content relevant to learners' purposes. This orientation proved particularly influential in English for Academic Purposes (EAP) and English for Specific Purposes (ESP), where language instruction is closely tied to disciplinary, professional, or institutional contexts. Closely related, *content-based approaches* integrated language learning with subject-matter knowledge, reinforcing the idea that language is best learned when used meaningfully.

At the same time, attention increasingly turned to tasks as central units of instruction. The *task-based approach* proposed that learners engage in purposeful activities such as problem-solving, opinion-gap, reasoning-gap, and information-transfer tasks, designed to sustain motivation and promote genuine communication. Here, language learning emerges as a by-product of meaningful engagement rather than the direct teaching of forms. Parallel to

these developments, *skill-based approaches* expanded the conception of language ability beyond the traditional four skills. Greater emphasis was placed on macro- and micro-skills, such as distinguishing between reading for gist, skimming, scanning, and summarizing. In addition, learners were expected to develop cognitive, academic, and study skills, including notetaking, organizing projects, and delivering oral presentations. This broadened view reflected a growing awareness that effective language use depends on strategic and cognitive competence as much as linguistic knowledge.

Despite these developments, concern grew that communicative and task-based syllabuses still focused too heavily on products of learning, rather than on the learning process itself. This led to the development of the *process-based approach to syllabus design*, as articulated by Breen and Candlin (1980). Rather than prescribing content in advance, a process-based syllabus views learning as dynamic and negotiable, constantly adapting to learners' evolving needs. Moreover, it emphasized the integration of process and method, foregrounding learners' internal learning processes. The focus moved from predetermined linguistic outcomes to the means by which learning occurs, including interaction, negotiation of meaning, and collaborative classroom practices. In this model, learners become active participants in shaping the syllabus, while teachers assume the role of facilitators who respond to emerging learning opportunities. In other words, the focus shifted to *what happens in the classroom and how it happens*, rather than on predetermined actions, while learning was considered as a co-construction that teachers and learners gradually build together.

Appedix 1 represents an example of a Process Syllabus created, week by week, with a group of students majoring in Primary Education Sciences. On the first day, only the course description and objectives appear and are made explicit to the students with the dual aim of creating awareness of the learning process they will experience during the course, and of raising expectations about content and activities they will be involved in. The language activities are then added, on a weekly basis, while following the in-progress development that naturally occurs in class. Such development strongly considers the learners' interests, the current events happening in real life, topics that can culturally engage the students and encourage them to reflect on relevant everyday life issues and academic or social values.

This concern with classroom processes gave rise to e*xploratory teaching and reflective practice*, notably in the work of Allwright and Bailey (1991) and Widdowson (1992). Teachers were encouraged to investigate classroom interaction and learner behaviour systematically, leading to *action research* approaches (Nunan, 1992). Here, teaching, research, and curriculum development become interdependent, allowing syllabuses to evolve in response to observed learning realities. Therefore, it encouraged teachers to systematically investigate classroom interaction and adapt teaching in response to learners' emerging needs.

3.3 The Humanistic View: Not an Approach But a *Style of Teaching*

Although very briefly, in the previous sections we attempted to build a line of argument that showed progression across methodological approaches, syllabus design, and learner-centred perspectives. Yet, even as syllabuses increasingly accounted for *context, function, tasks, skills, and learning processes*, it became clear that something fundamental was still missing: the *affective and human dimension of learning*. Research and practice had largely overlooked how learners' emotions, self-concept, motivation, and interpersonal relationships shape their ability to learn and use language.

This gap was addressed by humanistic approaches to language teaching[3], strongly influenced by Carl Rogers' (1969, 1983) humanistic psychology, which emphasized empathy, learner-centredness, and the importance of affective variables in learning. In language education, Earl Stevick (1976, 1980, 1990, 1998) played a pivotal role in highlighting the teacher's sensitive awareness of learner affect, arguing that successful language learning depends as much on emotional security and personal meaning as on method or materials. Similarly, Gertrude Moskovitz (1978) explicitly articulated humanism in language teaching, advocating practices that value the whole learner rather than treating students as mere language processors.

3 Much more could be added to the incredible cultural and humanistic input professionals and practitioners gained throughout time, thanks to the humanistic perspective in language learning. In this context, we briefly acknowledge some of the most relevant studies.

Mario Rinvolucri (1985, 2002, 2007, 2010 [co-author with Johnson]), as a genuine scholar and practitioner, brought this humanistic perspective into the classroom, emphasizing a "humanistic flavour" in teaching and viewing such an approach as a gift to learners that easily fosters trust, creativity and personal engagement. These ideas were later reinforced by broader educational theories, including Howard Gardner's (1985) theory of multiple intelligences, which challenged unitary notions of ability and highlighted individual learner differences, and Daniel Goleman's (1995) work on emotional intelligence, which underscored the central role of emotional awareness, empathy, and self-regulation in learning and social interaction.

In conclusion, the evolution of syllabus design reflects a gradual broadening of perspective: from form to function, from function to use, from use to process, and ultimately from process to the whole person. Contemporary approaches have increasingly recognized that effective language learning requires the integration of linguistic, cognitive, social, and affective dimensions, positioning learners not only as communicators and problem-solvers, but as *emotionally engaged human beings* participating in meaningful social worlds.

In Section 3, albeit briefly, we tried to reach some historical awareness of developments in language learning and teaching. We attempted to show critical understanding, while integrating theory, methodology, and classroom practice. We finally ended by mentioning the humanistic dimension, which clearly highlights that this is an aspect we should never forget when acting in the language classroom. But our next question is "How does all of this relate to University Language Centres?".

4. From Theory to Practice: Language Centres as Key Institutions Within the Academic Context

From the beginning of the 2000s, Language Centres have emerged as key institutions within the academic context, responding to profound changes in Higher Education brought about by globalization, internationalization, and increased student mobility. Universities have progressively recognized that language learning is no longer a peripheral service but a strategic component of academic and professional development.

Indeed, one of the defining characteristics of Language Centres is their multifaceted set of objectives. Chief among these is the ever-growing demand for multilingual competence, driven by international study programs, joint degrees, and global research networks. Language Centres also play a crucial role in fostering intercultural experiences, facilitating not only linguistic development but also intercultural awareness and communicative sensitivity. Moreover, they function as hubs for the exchange of knowledge and best practices within the Higher Education dimension, linking language pedagogy with academic disciplines, institutional policies, and international standards.

As mentioned in a previous section, Language Centres undertake a wide range of institutional and pedagogical tasks to meet these objectives. These include language teaching across levels and purposes, materials and course design, assessment and test development, tutoring and academic language support, as well as participation in project planning and implementation[4]. In addition, Language Centres are deeply involved in supporting the increasing number of international agreements, exchange programs, and student mobility initiatives that universities continuously pursue, providing linguistic preparation and ongoing support for both outgoing and incoming students[5].

At the operational level, the work of Language Centres is grounded in daily, learner-centred actions. Staff engage directly with students, guiding them toward accurate and effective language use, supporting weaknesses while enhancing individual strengths. A central aim is to develop learners' capacity for *autonomous learning*, equipping them with strategies and tools that allow them to transfer their language competence beyond the borders of an academic curriculum. In this way, Language Centres contribute to a shift from short-term academic achievement toward lifelong language learning, aligning institutional goals with learners' long-term personal and professional trajectories.

Overall, Language Centres occupy a pivotal position within universities, mediating between institutional internationalization strategies and individ-

4 See Argondizzo (Ed.) (2015) for background theoretical and practical insights on topics related to this issue.

5 As above, see Argondizzo (Ed.) (2009) for background theoretical and practical insights on topics related to these issues.

ual learner development. By integrating teaching, assessment, support, and innovation, they embody the evolving understanding of language education as a dynamic, strategic, and human-centred reality within Higher Education.

In parallel with the institutional consolidation of Language Centres, a decisive role in shaping contemporary language education in Higher Education has been played by the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR), developed by the Council of Europe and first published in 2001, with a significantly expanded Companion Volume in 2020.

The CEFR has provided a shared conceptual and descriptive framework for language learning, teaching, and assessment, enabling coherence, transparency, and comparability across institutions, programs, and national contexts. The original 2001 CEFR placed particular emphasis on general language competences, framed within a communicative orientation. Language ability was described as a combination of interrelated components, including a linguistic component (lexical, phonological, and syntactic knowledge), a sociolinguistic component (sensitivity to social norms, registers, and sociocultural conditions of language use), and a pragmatic component (the functional and purposeful use of linguistic resources in discourse). Importantly, the CEFR moved beyond purely linguistic knowledge by incorporating existential competence and know-how, acknowledging learners' attitudes, motivations, values, and strategic abilities as integral to successful communication.

Underlying this framework is most certainly the *action-oriented approach* (Council of Europe 1998), which conceptualizes learners not merely as language users, but as *social agents* who employ language to accomplish tasks in specific contexts. In this view, learning is grounded in purposeful action, aligning closely with the task-based, process-oriented, and humanistic approaches previously discussed. Learners are seen as members of a society who must activate linguistic and non-linguistic resources to achieve meaningful goals. The *2020 CEFR Companion Volume* further extended this perspective in response to evolving academic, professional, and social needs. Greater attention was given to Languages for Specific Purposes (LSP), reflecting the demands of academic and professional communication within internationalized Higher Education[6]. The updated framework also foregrounded medi-

6 The Council of Europe validated the first European Language Portfolio (ELP) developed around specific academic language skills by a team of researchers based at the University of Calabria. The Portfolio was officially validated under registration number 40.2003.

ation skills, recognizing learners' roles in facilitating understanding across languages, cultures, and disciplines. In doing so, the CEFR explicitly shifted the focus from the idealized native speaker to the more realistic and functional notion of the expert speaker, valuing effectiveness, adaptability, and intercultural competence over native-like proficiency.

Overall, the CEFR provides a unifying framework that bridges theory, institutional practice, and learner experience. With regards to Language Centres, it offers a common reference point for curriculum design, assessment, and certification, while remaining flexible enough to accommodate diverse learner needs, sociocultural contexts, and educational purposes. In this way, if effectively used, the CEFR complements and gives voice to the learner-centred, process-oriented, and socially grounded perspectives, as mentioned in the previous section, that characterize language instruction in Higher Education.

It is in this perspective and based on this argumentation that we can reflect on the institutional role that Language Centres have reached over time. This paves the way for our next questions: "When do Language Centre personnel have time to stop and reflect? How can we make academic governance understand that, beyond the meticulous daily work, many Language Centre staff need and desire to receive training, explore, carry out research, develop ideas based on their findings?". We will discuss this issue and give some ideas in the following sections.

5. Reflective Questions

As language instruction in Higher Education -shaped by internationalization, institutional accountability, and diverse learner needs- becomes increasingly complex, a crucial question emerges: when do we create the time and space to stop and reflect on the evolving realities? Amid teaching, assessment, project work, and administrative responsibilities, reflection is often treated as an optional or secondary activity. Yet, without sustained and systematic reflection, it becomes difficult to genuinely support students and academic communities or to ensure the quality and coherence of educational practices.

Reflective practice offers a powerful means of enhancing both individual teaching and institutional development. Through reflection, teachers who

participate in Language Centres' activities can critically examine not only *what* happens in classrooms, but *why* it happens, *how* changes align with learners' needs and contribute to broader academic goals. In this sense, reflection becomes a tool for informed decision-making, enabling educators to refine curricula, improve assessment practices, and design more inclusive and effective learning environments. It also allows institutions to respond thoughtfully to change, strengthening the link between pedagogical innovation and academic community.

Importantly, such reflective engagement is perfectly in line with institutional requirements. In fact, as highlighted in the introductory section of this paper, if we refer to the Italian academic context, it directly supports the national guidelines of the Italian Ministry of University and Research and aligns with the quality assurance principles promoted by Italian universities, which emphasize transparency, effectiveness, continuous improvement, and student-centred learning. Reflection, thus, functions as a bridge between pedagogical integrity and institutional accountability, reinforcing academic quality rather than competing with it.

As Farrell (2023) reminds us, reflective practice must be considered in a much deeper sense. It is not merely thinking back on what was (or was not) successful in a lesson, but rather it should be a systematic and sustained analysis of teaching that encompasses planning, classroom action, outcomes, and -crucially- the teacher's own identity. Reflective practice involves examining who we are as people, what we do in the classroom, why we do it, and with what results. Indeed, teaching cannot be separated from the teacher as a human being since educators bring their histories, beliefs, emotions, and values into every lesson they teach.

Based on these premises, reflection becomes both a professional and ethical responsibility. It allows teachers to grow alongside their students, and it enables Language Centres and universities to cultivate communities of practice grounded in awareness, coherence, and shared purpose. In other words, we can consider it a meaningful and human-centred condition that could encourage language personnel to bridge the Research-Practice gap at University Language Centres.

6. Research Methodologies

Table 1 below provides an overview of research methodologies that may be employed to investigate teaching and learning processes in classroom contexts. It is intended to offer a set of examples of reflective and research-based practices conducted for and by language teachers.

Table 1 – Research methodologies

Methodology	Aims	Techniques	Who conducts the research
Psychometric	to discover the outcomes of teaching techniques used with an experimental group	use of pre- and post-experiment tests with experimental and control groups	the researcher
Ethnographic	to obtain insights into the classroom context as a “cultural” system	observe the classroom in naturalistic “uncontrolled” contexts and provide description	the researcher
Interaction analysis	to understand how speech events develop within a classroom	code classroom interaction through observation	the researcher
Discourse analysis and corpus linguistics	to analyse natural patterns of classroom discourse in linguistic terms	study classroom transcripts and assign utterances to predetermined categories	the researcher
Action research	to increase professional awareness among teachers of teaching/learning issues	develop a plan of action, act to implement the plan, observe the effects, reflect on procedures, and re-adjust teaching if needed	the teacher

Psychometric research aims to investigate the outcomes of teaching techniques by comparing learner performance through pre- and post-experimental testing involving experimental and control groups. This type of research is typically conducted by researchers, although teacher participation can also play a relevant role. *Ethnographic research*, by contrast, seeks to gain in-depth insights into the classroom as a cultural system. It does so by observing teaching and learning in naturalistic, uncontrolled settings and by providing rich descriptive accounts of classroom life. Such findings can be particular-

ly valuable for the teachers, as they offer deeper understanding of learners' personalities, behaviours, and social dynamics. *Interaction analysis* focuses on understanding how speech events develop within the classroom, relying on systematic observation and the coding of classroom interactions. Similarly, *discourse analysis* and *corpus linguistics* examine classroom discourse from a linguistic perspective by analysing transcripts and assigning utterances to predetermined analytical categories. This empirical study of language can be supported through the use of large, electronic corpora of spoken and written texts, which are analysed computationally to identify patterns of language use, including frequencies, collocations, and contextual variation. These analyses can highlight learners' linguistic strengths and weaknesses and, consequently, help teachers better understand the language input students require and the pedagogical actions they should undertake.

In contrast to researcher-led approaches, *action research* is usually carried out by teachers themselves, often as a form of collaborative research[7], and aims to enhance professional awareness of teaching and learning issues. This methodology involves planning and implementing didactic actions, observing its effects, reflecting on the process, and refining teaching practices accordingly.

As illustrated in Table 2, a set of practical ideas of frequently used language activities, promoting active and culturally oriented language learning, is presented. The five activities are linked to classroom-based case studies designed to enable teachers to observe and analyse specific classroom actions. The aim is to identify the language that students need to perform academic tasks accurately and effectively within an English for Academic Purposes context.

7 More insights on collaborative research can be found in Beaumont et al. (2020) and Erickson et al. (2023).

Table 2 – Potential ideas for case studies

Activities performed in class	Topic for the case study	General aim
Oral presentations	Which discourse markers the students use to accomplish their tasks.	To become aware of language peculiarities that learners need to perform accurately. E.g. a) very simple linkers or formulaic expressions that they often ignore or forget to use (well, that's it, and now the floor goes to, thank you for …); b) personal input (gestures, body language); c) technical lexicon.
Students' posters and mind maps	Which features the students use to provide information they are interested in and want to share with others. The role the visual impact plays when communicating through a poster or a mind map.	To become aware of learners' creativity when preparing a poster or a mind map with the aim to convey messages and share opinions on topics related to their fields of study. Support them with further ideas, observe the language they use and give the necessary back up.
Teacher-Students interaction	What language peculiarities occur in class during the lesson.	To observe speech modifications that spontaneously occur to facilitate learners' comprehension; to explore the nature of effective task-oriented interaction.
Speaking activities that make visible students' errors	What errors frequently occur when students communicate (e.g. word choice to convey meanings, sentence formation, distorted pronunciation).	To identify learners' language weaknesses with the aim to become aware of language practice students need to reinforce communication abilities.
Songs	The language use students can learn when analyzing lyrics (e.g. identification of informal language, spelling, structural peculiarities). What support sounds and rhythm give to enhance listening skills. What linguistic and cultural input artists can provide.	To create a student's corpus of informal language use, in relation to topics and cultural concepts conveyed in songs.

As illustrated in the table, frequently used language activities, such as in-class oral presentations on topics related to the learners' field of study (see Argondizzo, 2002) and the use of songs as pedagogical resources to explore the richness of language in lyrics (see Mansfield 2022), can provide teachers with valuable opportunities to conduct simple yet meaningful research. Two further examples focus on identifying common learner errors and language features that emerge during class interaction. This can be achieved through systematic observation of teacher-student and peer-to-peer interaction, with particular attention to speech modifications employed to support communication. A final example considers the cultural input provided by artists, with the aim of observing learners' responses to both the language used and the cultural messages conveyed. While these practices may require a substantial investement of time, they serve a dual purpose for teachers: they enhance awareness of learners' language needs as identified through leaner-centred activities and create opportunities for professional growth and personal self-realization.

As a follow-up, the next section presents a selection of outcomes derived from best practices that have fostered creativity and activated diverse linguistic and cultural dynamics within university Language Centre contexts.

7. Voices from Language Centres

This section brings together the voices of experienced practitioners[8] who have devoted all or part of their professional lives to Language Centres. Drawing on the perspectives of instructors, researchers and IT personnel, the following excerpts from video-interviews offer insight into how professional practice is shaped by shared values and experiences. Beyond highlighting the central role of motivation, collaboration, and awareness in teaching, learning, and project planning, the accounts invite a deeper reflection on the human dimensions of the educational process. In particular, as emphasized in Excerpt 5, they draw the attention to the paramount importance of emotions and the affective domain that characterize daily work, positioning them not

8 The author gratefully acknowledges Gillian Mansfield (Università di Parma, IT), Enrica Rossi (Università di Urbino, IT), Jean M. Jimenez, Simone Malizia, Vanessa Marcella (Università della Calabria, IT).

as peripheral factors but as foundational elements of meaningful and sustainable educational practice.

Gillian, professor of English Language and Linguistics

> [1] Rather than an event, I should say motivation, motivation, motivation … has carried me through all my years of teaching: Motivating the students to find an interest in what they are doing. So, we were always watching sitcoms and worked on the language of humour that was used to make people laugh. And they did their own research; in fact, they did the research and provided the all class with examples of the language they had identified. I also used corpus linguistics and students themselves compiled their own specialised corpus, according to their own interests. Just let me give you an example, one girl who worked for a firm of luxury boats decided to create a corpus on promotional language literature of boats and she came up with some very unusual words that she found in the corpus, one being "generous'. Why would you find the word generous in a corpus on luxury boats. One had to do with reasons of space, generous accommodation when you think of how small luxury boats can be. So, she was really thrilled with what she found. All the students as well were talking about "my corpus" with what they had created, and they were all proud, they thought it was something of their own. It is so important to find things that really involve your students in what they are doing.

Jean, professor of English Language and Translation

> [2] So, when I think of Language Centre projects, the first thing that comes two my mind are two European projects, that I was so fortunate to participate in. The projects[9] are "CMC, Communicating in Multilingual Context, Awareness and development of academic language skills for mobility students", so the concept was on the promotion of academic skills in six different languages, Dutch, English, Italian, Portuguese, Slovak and Spanish and "CMC_E, Communicating in Multilingual Context meets the Enterprises, Awareness and development of academic and professional language skills for mobility students, university leavers and

9 The European Projects involved a network of seven European Universities, with the Language Centre of the University of Calabria (IT) as coordinating Partner.

in-service workers", which instead focused on professional language skills in the different languages, to which we added Polish. It was an incredible experience, we collaborated with teams from each university to create didactic materials and we travelled to different countries, so you can imagine the cultural and intralingual aspect of it all. My task, in particular, was planning and revising the material created, following up with the students who used the materials and doing research together with the Italian as well as European colleagues. One of the highlights was when the CMC_E was selected by the European Commission as one of the five most innovative projects of language teaching and learning in the decade of 2002- 2012. We travelled to Cyprus for the ceremony, and we were able to share this didactic experience and research with an even wider audience. So, it was a fantastic experience.

Enrica, researcher of English Language and Translation

[3] Gestire il "campionato nazionale delle lingue', un evento che se all'inizio ci piaceva considerarlo come una gara rivolta agli studenti degli istituti di istruzione secondaria, negli anni invece abbiamo iniziato a preferire di definirlo come un evento che accomuna, che avvicina persone che hanno tutte il piacere di amare le lingue e le culture moderne. Se devo pensare ad un momento in cui il Centro Linguistico mi ha reso particolarmente felice è da quando mi occupo di questa organizzazione. Questo è solo uno degli eventi che mi crea maggiori emozioni, continuiamo a lavorare per far si che le lingue e le culture moderne ci rendano persone più ricche[10].

10 Managing the National Languages Championship – an event that we initially considered as a competition aimed at students from secondary schools – has, over the years, come to be understood in a different way. We now prefer to define it as an event that brings people together, fostering connections among those who share a passion for languages and modern cultures. If I were to identify a moment in which the Language Centre has made me particularly happy, it would be through my involvement in organising this initiative. This is just one of the events that generate the strongest emotions for me, and we continue to work to ensure that modern languages and cultures help us become richer individuals, both personally and culturally.

Vanessa, research fellow of English Language and Translation

> [4] Language Centres are places where not only students, academic, personnel, the community can learn languages, but they also foster multicultural awareness, diversity, and there is another important aspect: inclusivity. This concept is not only an outward attitude into welcoming newcomers, but it also reflects self-identity, and languages are part of our identity. Therefore, disseminating information through their website, as an example, in languages spoken by the community, locally, is fundamental and there is one Language Centre which provides a great example in this practice and it is the Language Centre of the University of Bolzano.

Simone, information technology (IT) specialist

> [5] I worked at the Language Centre, and I had the privilege to be part of several projects. As an IT specialist, I work behind the scenes focusing on digitalising processes, products and ideas. But I remember very well not the technical aspects; I remember laughs, jokes, the nights spent together trying to meet the deadlines to bring ideas to life. In the end, I remember it wasn't just work, it was creating something very special that allowed everyone to express the inner voice, and the sense and the connection, the collaboration with all the members of the staff, it was something very special.

Based on the concepts that emerge from the excerpts, we can affirm that a Language Centre can be conceived as an integrated space in which three complementary dimensions coexist harmoniously. First, it provides a technologically rich environment that supports effective and flexible language learning. Second, it fosters an affectively welcoming atmosphere, where learners feel supported, motivated, and confident to engage with linguistic and intercultural challenges. Third, it functions as an institutional hub for practice-based research in language learning and teaching, enabling the development of a network of academic contexts in which knowledge, objectives, and experiences are continuously shared and refined.

Thus, University Language Centres embrace a mission that will extend beyond the immediate acquisition of linguistic competence. It is a mission that, in the short run, aims to promote the development of further knowledge

and critical awareness, encouraging both students and teachers to become autonomous and reflective thinkers throughout the learning and teaching process. In the long run, it unfolds not only within the university context but also across learners' broader academic and professional dimensions. This perspective takes us back to Carl Rogers' view of education considered as a dynamic and lifelong process. In his words:

> The only [person] who is educated is the [one] who has learned how to learn, the [one] who has learned how to adapt and change; the [one] who has realized that no knowledge is secure, that only the process of seeking knowledge gives the basis for security. (Rogers, 1969, p. 104)

In this sense, Language Centres become spaces where learning is understood not as the accumulation of fixed knowledge, but as the cultivation of adaptability, awareness, and continuous growth.

8. Effective Support for University Language Centres

Within the ecosystem of university Language Centres, professional associations such as AICLU[11] and CercleS[12] function as key communities of practice, supporting practitioners through structured opportunities for exchange, reflection, and collective learning. These associations provide spaces in which professionals can articulate shared challenges, negotiate meanings, and build a common professional culture that extends beyond individual institutional contexts.

AICLU contributes to this community-building process through the organization of conferences and initiatives dedicated to the dissemination of best practices. Its commitment to professional development is further reinforced by teacher training activities and by the publication of video clips on the AICLU website, which document experiences, pedagogical approaches, and project outcomes. These resources foster peer learning and encourage reflective practice grounded in real-world Language Centre contexts. Indeed, acknowledging and sharing current and past work is a crucial first step to-

11 Associazione Italiana dei Centri Linguistici Universitari, https://www.aiclu.org

12 See note 2, Section 1 in this paper.

ward transforming it into a meaningful resource for ongoing professional development.

Similarly, CercleS offers an international network that connects Language Centre practitioners across institutions and countries in Europe. Through its conferences and institutional website, CercleS facilitates dialogue and collaboration among members of the community. A key contribution in this process is offered by the *LLHE Journal*, published twice a year, which brings together peer-reviewed research articles and reports on activities and projects. By integrating scholarly research with accounts of teaching actions, the journal reinforces the link between theory and practice and contributes to the ongoing construction of shared knowledge within the professional community.

9. Conclusive Remarks: A Mission for the Present and the Future

This paper has outlined a mission for further knowledge grounded in three interconnected and complementary dimensions that frame the work of University Language Centres and their contribution to Higher Education.

The first dimension, *study and reflect*, highlights the theoretical perspective. Through engagement with background studies, practitioners are encouraged to retrace established beliefs about language learning and teaching, critically examine them, and explore how they may be reinterpreted, integrated, or supported by emerging ideas and frameworks. This reflective stance enables continuity with past knowledge while remaining open to innovation, both humanistic and technological.

The second dimension, *observe, analyse, and reflect*, emphasizes the role of empirical inquiry. Systematic observation of students through research allows for the identification of evolving learner needs and learning objectives. At the same time, it offers teachers the opportunity to engage in field research, positioning them not only as practitioners but also as investigators of their own pedagogical contexts.

The third dimension, *describe and act*, focuses on practice-informed knowledge. By documenting and analysing the practical contributions generated through research on learning and teaching, Language Centres can address new pedagogical challenges and implement concrete actions. This process

has the potential to stimulate the creativity of both experienced educators and new generations of teachers, fostering effective learning that seeks solutions to specific pedagogical issues.

Together, these dimensions articulate a mission and a challenge for the present and the future. The actions proposed throughout this study aim to bridge the gap between theory and practice by promoting an integrated approach to researching while teaching and teaching while researching. Such an approach reinforces the view that "the progress of language teaching and learning at university depends on research for validation, the avoidance of fossilization, and equality of esteem" (Little, 2020). Embracing this mission would allow Language Centres to be recognized not merely as service departments, but it would hopefully place them in parity with the academic context and further contribute to the educational growth of the university community of which they fully are an integral part.

These final remarks return to a future-oriented perspective, once again drawing attention to the need for university governance to recognize and actively support the vital role that University Language Centres play within academic communities. The paper concludes with the reflections of a University Rector[13], whose voice and perspective reinforce trust in the educational mission, academic value and long-term contribution of Language Centres within universities and for the future of higher education.

> La mia attività all'interno del Centro Linguistico è stata, innanzitutto, un'esperienza molto bella, una esperienza di contaminazione dei saperi. Io sono un informatico, Direttore di un Dipartimento di Matematica e Informatica, ed è stato un modo per aprirmi ad un nuovo mondo, conoscere la realtà di chi utilizza una lingua, la conoscenza delle lingue per avvicinarsi concretamente ai nostri studenti, soprattutto, per cercare in qualche maniera di tenere anche un po' vivo il legame che c'è tra i docenti e gli studenti e rafforzare le conoscenze internazionali, aprire gli orizzonti. Abbiamo fatto tanti progetti e credo che questi progetti abbiano creato un senso di comunità, ci siamo raccolti attorno al Centro Linguistico di Ateneo. E

13 Our sincere thanks go to Professor Gianluigi Greco, who was Director of the Department of Mathematics and Computer Science at the time this interview was conducted and who currently holds the position of Rector at the University of Calabria, IT. He actively contributed as a member of the Scientific Committee of the University Language Centre from 2016 to 2019.

> credo che questi Centri debbano essere potenziati, sono veramente un luogo su quale investire, un luogo sul quale gli atenei dovrebbero cercare di puntare le loro azioni, un luogo in cui si fa tanta attività linguistica, ma soprattutto si migliora la didattica che facciamo. Sono luoghi dove si può fare ricerca ed è fondamentale che i docenti quando vadano in aula sappiano come utilizzare il mezzo linguistico per raggiungere efficacemente i nostri studenti. Oggi puntiamo tanto sulle tecnologie didattiche, sulle tecnologie educative. Io sono in un Dipartimento che fa di questo la propria avanguardia ma non bastano, soprattutto nei corsi internazionali. Abbiamo bisogno di utilizzare le parole giuste, il vocabolario giusto, il modo giusto per rapportarci a degli studenti che provengono da tutte le parti del mondo. Ecco, questa è una ricerca complicata e solo all'interno di un Centro Linguistico si possono trovare le competenze per portare questa ricerca a frutto nelle nostre aule[14].

Our final wish is that this forward-looking perspective may be recognised and embraced by university governance at both national and European levels.

14 My experience within the Language Centre has been, first of all, a very positive one—an experience of cross-fertilisation of knowledge. I am a computer scientist and the Director of a Department of Mathematics and Computer Science, and this experience allowed me to open myself to a new world: to become familiar with the reality of those who use a second language and linguistic knowledge as a concrete means of engaging with our students. Above all, as a means to keep alive the relationship between teachers and students and to strengthen international connections, thereby broadening perspectives.
We developed many projects, and I believe these initiatives helped to create a strong sense of community, bringing everyone closer to the University Language Centre. I am convinced that these Centres should be strengthened: they are truly places in which to invest and towards which universities should direct their strategic efforts. They are spaces where a great deal of language-related activity takes place, but, more importantly, where the quality of our teaching is enhanced.
Language Centres are also places where research can be carried out. It is essential that teachers, when they enter the classroom, know how to use language effectively in order to reach their students. Today we place great emphasis on educational and instructional technologies. I work in a department that is at the forefront of this field, but technology alone is not sufficient, especially in international programmes. We need to use the right words, the appropriate vocabulary, and the most effective ways of interacting with students who come from all over the world. This is a complex area of inquiry, and only within a Language Centre can the necessary expertise be found to bring this research into our classrooms.

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Appendix

Example of a Process Syllabus[15]: Some Excerpts

Department of Mathematics and Informatics
English for Primary Education Sciences (Lab 5) B2 Level
2nd semester
Process Syllabus A.Y. 2024 – 2025

Course description
English for Primary Education Sciences (School Teaching) is an introduction to a correct approach to authentic materials related to the students' academic field of study. Videos with specific focus on teaching children will be watched and analyzed through the following tasks: extensive/intensive listening, note-taking, field-specific vocabulary development by *concept maps* and its appropriate use, class discussion which will elicit students' critical feedback on the activities observed. Academic competences will specifically focus on the development of a *Lesson Plan* and on how to present its content through micro-teaching experiences.

Course objectives and skills
The *English for Primary Education Sciences* course focuses on the development of academic skills in L2 with the support of authentic materials related to the students' academic field of study.
The course will offer the chance to improve the following *academic-oriented skills*:

- listening and interactive skills (e.g.: taking notes; being able to ask questions on a given topic; exchanging ideas using simple and accurate language);
- reading skills necessary to understand field specific texts with detailed focus on topics related to the field of *Teaching Children*;
- oral production and interaction skills developed through group work and oral presentations on *Primary School Teaching* related topics chosen by the students. The presentations of the *Lesson Plan* will be delivered through mind maps and micro-teaching;
- critical and creative thinking useful for communicative and collaborative group experiences, both in the classroom as well as in the daily academic context.

In the specific, in relation to knowledge and competences acquired and the ability to apply such competences in communicative contexts, at the end of the course the students will have achieved a B2 competence level (CEFR). This will be the follow up to the *English Language Course IV.*
They will be able to understand and analyze written and oral texts linked with the professional and intercultural context of nursery and primary school. They will have developed appropriate study skills which will be useful tools for their lifelong autonomous learning. Such learning competences will support their ability to apply problem solving strategies and text analysis to be carried out autonomously.
As for learning competences, they will have developed awareness of teaching approaches and will be able to plan, implement and evaluate learning and teaching strategies which will be appropriate for nursery and primary school children.

15 This model is offered by the author who acknowledges the active participation of the students majoring in Scienze della Formazione Primaria, Dipartimento di Matematica e Computer Science, Università della Calabria, Italia.

Dates	Content
25 February 2025	**Orientation and guidelines**
Topic 1	**Warm up activities: Familiarizing with the Group** - *Getting to know each other.* - *What do you expect from your English for Primary School Education course?'* - *My English V Lab is…* - *Close your eyes and …. dream, think about concepts, expressions, ideas.* - *What about me: Storytelling from Carmen Prof and short descriptions of themselves from students. Pair and group work.* The students write a short paragraph about themselves. They talk to a friend. With the group, they report what they learned from the other student. **Academic Value:** Socializing.
Topic 2	**Familiarizing with the Syllabus and the core Topics and subtopics** - *What can we say about these words: Education, Teaching, Learning.* - *The Syllabus: Process syllabus* **Academic Value:** Becoming aware of the new experience and of the language competences to achieve in English. **Homework:** Read the text about **Education**.
4 March	
Topic 1	**The Syllabus**, **The structure of the lesson** **Some games:** *The Ball; 1, 2, 3 Freeze* (from Children in Action, Prentice Hall Int.)
Topic 2	**Some concepts: What is Education** *and what involves?* **Some reflections** on **Study Skills:** *Reading.* What do we need to know? **Objectives:** Reflecting about appropriate study skills. **Academic Value:** Awareness of study strategies.
11 March (no class)	**Homework** A) The students reflect on the presentations analyzed in class. B) They read in detail and for themselves, as a moment for reflection, the text on Primary Education we analyzed in class. C) They write a short paragraph about or description of: a) what Primary Education is for them; b) their reading strategies; c) the game they played or observed in class; d) they select 10 words they learned in class and write the definitions.

18 March	**Warming up:** ***Let's revise some homework.***
Topic 1	**What is Primary Education?** Learn.org https://learn.org/articles/What_is_Primary_Education.html Students read the text and analyze content, lexicon, structures. Focus is also given to pronunciation. Use of a monolingual dictionary.
Topic 2	**Education for sustainable development: Video (1st part)** https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7dzFbP2AgFo Students watch the video and make their comments. Focus on lexicon and interesting expressions. They select a goal that best represents them. They focus on the most relevant words and find definitions for them. **Homework** The students write 10 "I do" actions and 10 "I don't" actions in relation to respect for the environment. They give their reasons and practical examples. **Social Value:** Growing awareness of respect for the Environment and the context where we live.
15 April	
Topic 1	**We, the People, for the Global Goals**. Students watch the video and take notes of interesting words and expressions. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RpqVmvMCmp0 Value: Reflecting on the concepts of cooperation as a global goal. Students follow the oral part of the video, when the video stops (teacher's selection) they have to note down the expressions, in a sort of dynamic *note down dictation.* Then, they focus on lexicon and interesting expressions. They focus on the most relevant words and find definitions for them. They select a goal that best represents them. **Social Value:** Respect for nature and the environment.
29 April	
Topic 1	**Where do the children play: Song by Cat Stevens (2nd part):** analysis of lyrics and messages conveyed **https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nBCJhNiKhFE**
Topic 2	**Some games:** *Mime and Say …* **Didactic Value:** Playing in class with children. **Homework** Students write a short text (200/300 words) about the lesson they attended today and express your emotions about this experience. Focus on *Education for Sustainable Development*. **Social Value:** Growing awareness of respect for the Environment and the context where we live.

6 May	
Topic 1	**Lesson Planning: Hints and suggestions.** **https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZW36HN4eV9k** **Video 2 and 3**: The students watch the video and analyze language and content.
Topic 2	**Why using mind maps in Education.** Extensive and intensive listening. Samples for the oral exam. https://www.youtube.co/watch?v=xCyjFipytRE
Topic 3	**Children in action (Argondizzo 1992, 2002)**: excerpts from a textbook **Social and Didactic Value:** becoming aware of didactic techniques appropriate when teaching children.