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Celebrating CercleS: introductory notes to 30 years of professional activity in the field of language learning and teaching

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Abstract and acknowledgements: This introduction provides a glimpse of CercleS' mission over the past 30 years, as clearly emerges in the contributions this issue contains. It is a Special Issue which celebrates the 30th anniversary of CercleS (1991-2021) and coincides with our being invited to become Editors-in-Chief of *Language Learning in Higher Education,* indeed a great honour for us. We would like to thank the present and past Executive Boards and Coordinating Committees for placing their faith and trust in us. We would also like to thank the authors who contributed to this special issue and the De Gruyter staff for their ongoing support. In this and future issues, we intend to carry forward the precious work of our predecessors, encouraging the CercleS community to continue to join forces in fostering best practices of modern language education both in Europe and the world at large.

Keywords: CercleS; field research; knowledge sharing; language teaching and learning; professional and academic interests; University Language Centres

In a global perspective of fostering language learning, it has become increasingly evident that the sharing of information and experiential knowledge is beneficial for people with common professional or academic needs and interests, be they teacher or learner. This has been, and continues to be one of CercleS' aims, as is clearly confirmed in the mission statements published on individual Language Centre websites as well as those of its National Associations and the CercleS website itself. Indeed, the specific mission of University Language Centres (ULCs), and their objectives in general, have increased both nationally and internationally as language needs increase around the world. Research into language teaching and learning in the 21st century thus continually extends and develops parallel to the linguistic demands of the world citizen.

This Special Issue calls for, and is, a celebration for CercleS, the *Confederation of European Language Centres in Higher Education,* to mark its 30 years of

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professional activity in the field of modern language education. Its major aim is to create an occasion for language scholars, professionals and practitioners to share ideas about research and didactics relating to language development, which stems from the input CercleS has created over the years. In particular, it wants to offer an opportunity for a collaborative debate that involves the many members of the Associations of Language Centres across Europe who, thanks to their varied working and geographical backgrounds, wish to inform the community of language professionals about past and present experiences and thus enrich the ongoing discussion. Indeed, thanks to this special issue, it is CercleS' wish to embrace a number of different perspectives in order to stimulate in-depth critical reflection on topics relating to the well-being of UCLs and the development of language competences among the generations of students and the population in general.

Since its institution in 1991, CercleS has not simply developed in the growth of its membership, but more specifically in the wealth of collaborations and expertise throughout Europe and even beyond. Indeed, within an overall framework of marketization of universities and promotional discourse (Askehave 2007; Bhatia 1993, 2005; Fairclough 1993), CercleS has on a worldwide scale managed to establish its credentials as an association renowned for its commitment in the field. Among its activities, CercleS can boast of regular national and international conferences, seminars, focus groups, didactic oriented projects, research projects, common assessment procedures, high-level consultancy, and in the last 10 years, its own journal, *Language Learning in Higher Education*.

At an individual level, and with a view to preparing students for lifelong language learning skills, ULCs provide official courses and learning activities to meet the language needs required of undergraduates and graduates in practically every curriculum and for their future careers as well. Very often, they also respond to the needs of the local non-academic community. Consequently, in this current reality, language scholars and educators have to keep constantly abreast of, and incorporate, the results of their latest research and that of others into language teaching and learning. Hence, the pivotal role that ULCs must inevitably, and necessarily, play in the language teaching and learning process.

Furthermore, due to the pressing global demands of the world citizen, there are numerous areas of learning that ULCs have come to foreground well beyond the compulsory targeting of levels of general language competence, which have highlighted traditional language teaching and learning since their very origins. One of the current trends today, for example, is the integration of intercultural competence into the language programme (see among others, Clark and Dervin 2014, Kramsch 2013, Dervin 2010; 2016) and the recognition of multilingual diversity (Herzog-Punzenberger et al. 2017) in and outside the classroom. Again, over

the years, language testing has received constant attention in the wake of the Council of Europe's Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR). In fact, various National Associations of CercleS have met the challenge by creating their own forms of assessment following the CEFR guidelines. Likewise, premising the latter, it is in the order of the day for ULCs to provide language courses, whether to develop general or special language skills that do not fail to make specific reference to the CEFR. The above topics are all present in this celebratory issue.

Bearing in mind the above, ULCs clearly fit into the category of a Community of Practice (CoP), as outlined in Wenger-Trayner and Wenger-Trayner's well quoted definition: "Communities of practice are groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly" (2015: online). The authors claim that a CoP is not simply a club of friends or a network of connections between people, but defines its identity as a shared domain of interest, here obviously for the purposes of modern language education. Justifiably, becoming a member of a CoP involves commitment, mutual engagement, a shared competence, where again we can highlight the fact that the focus is on the sharing of information and knowledge. Past issues of *Language Learning in Higher Education* with contributions from single and multiple authors are excellent examples of this form of collaboration. CoPs build relationships that enable individual members to work with and learn from each other. This is also evident in the joint activities of ULC teaching staff and workgroups in all kinds of national and transnational projects. Learners too, when they engage in peer learning, both face-to-face or through synchronous/asynchronous social networking, play a very important role in the intercultural growth of CoPs. Very significantly, Wenger-Trayner and Wenger-Trayner state that members of a CoP are practitioners who "care about their standing with each other" (2015: online) and "[T]hey develop a shared repertoire of resources: experiences, stories, tools, ways of addressing recurring problems – in short a shared practice."

There are numerous implications in these characteristics of shared practices for ULCs, as well as for the national and international associations they choose to join. Firstly, taking into consideration a single ULC, we have at the various levels administrative and technical staff, teachers and students interacting separately and together with a common cause – the overall teaching process and the language learning outcomes. Wenger explains how:

> Communities of practice grow out of a convergent interplay of competence and experience that involves mutual engagement. They offer an opportunity to negotiate competence through an experience of direct participation. As a consequence, they remain important social units of learning even in the context of much larger systems. These larger systems are constellations of interrelated communities of practice (2000: 229).

In this context, ULCs join forces to become a National Association, that is, local groups belonging to a national group, which then desires to become part of an international one. Among the inherent features regarding the identity of CoPs, as inferred above, Wenger (2006: 4) notes how practitioners create a direct link between learning and performance since people with like minds and intentions work together in groups and teams. Furthermore, CoPs are not necessarily constrained by any formal structure, since connections are constantly created across organizational and geographic boundaries. In fact, as this special issue continues in the tradition, contributions to *LLHE* are not limited to members of CercleS, they are welcomed from researchers and practitioners from all over the world, who discuss a wealth of relevant language learning issues that are equally significant and shed new light on experiential knowledge.

As mentioned earlier, National Associations join forces in CercleS to represent the common cause on a wider scale and to foster shared teaching and learning resources by means of conferences and joint projects, for example. Indeed, as Wenger-Trayner and Wenger-Trayner (2015: online) specify, "Communities of practice enable practitioners to take collective responsibility for managing the knowledge they need, recognizing that, given the proper structure, they are in the best position to do this". Such a statement draws the threads together of CercleS' ultimate aim, that of becoming a body of expertise that receives due recognition in the higher echelons of language education and the needs of the world citizen. We are reminded of this in the CercleS Mission Statement: "CercleS represents its members before European authorities and agencies, serving as a preeminent channel of matters pertaining to language policy issues and educational situations that may affect its members." Taking an active part in a language association and adhering to its mission inevitably implies being prepared to take positions on numerous aspects of language learning at levels higher than the community itself, and implies expecting to be consulted on language issues that focus, for example, on the internationalisation of an institution. Decisions cannot be taken on language policy without consulting the language educators who have not just been employed to provide language classes *tout court*. They have the expertise with which, for example, to inform their institutions on current language needs and trends, to request the appropriate technology necessary to support the methodology for best learning practices both inside and outside the classroom, and with which to advise on the needs created by the current realities of plurilingualism and multilingual diversity at local and global levels. ULCs need to be one step ahead, and they can only be so if they have enquiring minds, if they take it upon themselves to research, experiment and gain experiential knowledge which can be shared within and throughout the various academic communities.

It is for this very reason that the mission of ULCs, and above all CercleS in its support, must surely come in for constant review, since their professional activities need to develop alongside a multitude of language needs in the evolving context of language diversity within their own local institution and around the world at large. Indeed, research into language teaching and learning in the 21st century must be carried out in immediate response to the ever-developing linguistic demands of the world citizen or even anticipating them. In order to gain accreditation in the field of language education, ULCs not only have to work within their own universities and beyond, satisfying the immediate needs of the local CoP, but remaining part of a larger entity from which it can take and give inspiration to others.

This special issue of *LLHE* brings together not only the challenges and achievements of the past and the present times but, just as importantly, it wants to look ahead and envisage the future challenges that ULCs will have to face in the ever-evolving world of language education. These challenges, we believe, will include professionals belonging to the CercleS community at all levels: administrative and technical staff as the present realities even more constantly require, teaching and research personnel, learners of any language, culture and age. Indeed, CercleS strongly believes that it is the duty of language scholars and professionals never to forget the role that languages have in society and the role that UCLs play in language acquisition and learning. Moreover, CercleS is aware of the many achievements which, within the European context, have been reached throughout the years and the numerous efforts that have been made in order to shed light on the relevance linguistic issues have within academic contexts and, more broadly, within society. Thus, as mentioned above, this *LLHE* Special Issue wants both to acknowledge the successes of CercleS, and also to envisage its future goals. Regarding the former, the volume opens with the section *Voices from CercleS current and past Presidents* which includes contributions from scholars and professionals who have decided to commit themselves, for a number of years, in leading and giving strength to this European CoP. The following sections, *Voices from European University Language Centres and beyond* and *Reports*, are collections of papers from CercleS members that refer not only to past and present language learning actions, but also look to future collaboration. Furthermore, the issue also includes contributions from beyond the European context, as the two papers that report on language practices in the Caribbean and raciolinguistic ideology in the United States highlight. Once again, the aim is to enhance the multicultural aspect of the issue, which wants to emphasize the wide range of cultures and teaching/learning styles that practitioners in ULCs are exposed to, and which they put into practice during their academic lives. Experiences are therefore considered from a European perspective and beyond, thus providing

readers with insights that should help reinforce the concept of belonging to a community that crosses geographical boundaries.

Themes include wide areas that favour important changes in the fields of ULC management and organization, language learning and research, language teaching. Such areas foster significant debate on how practices naturally interweave with changes and development in the current world. This encourages the sharing of a wider range of backgrounds, findings, expertise, ideas and discussions, which can be continued through to future issues.

Section 1, *Voices from CercleS current and past Presidents*, opens with David Little's paper "Plurilingualism, learner autonomy and constructive alignment: A vision for university language centres in the 21st century". Little promptly points to the future challenges that ULCs, and CercleS in particular, need to face in the coming decades of the 21st century. As in his past contributions to LLHE (among others 2016) Little does not fail to express his vision of an Association such as CercleS and his view on the necessary model it must set for others in its research into language learning, research being an essential component of its activities alongside, and on a par with, other academic departments within their institutions. This is why ULCs must shed any coating of inferior status they may have unwillingly acquired in the light of the fact of having been been set up as service units. ULCs can only receive due recognition if they advocate research-based teaching and teaching-based research. Little rightly exhorts CercleS members to make themselves known as "beacons of good practice" by continuing to investigate well recognised areas of study such as and among others, plurilingualism, learner autonomy, and by constructively aligning curriculum, the teaching and learning process and appropriate assessment. Furthermore, he quotes the single and joint studies of Allwright and Hanks with regard to proposing exploratory practice as an efficient means with which to encourage teachers and learners to reflect critically on the teaching/learning process.

Maurizio Gotti's contribution, "Recent developments concerning the use of English for teaching and research purposes", focusses on the current globalizing trend in Academia for the use of English as a medium of instruction in many non-English speaking countries, which triggers from the overall preference of English as a Lingua Franca for international communication. Gotti discusses not only the challenges this shift has provoked with the increasing need for the teaching of specialised discourses in numerous scientific disciplines and the opportunities this opens, but also more specifically, the implications regarding the level of content competence acquired on the part of the learner as well as questions regarding language proficiency.

Bringing together his many years of research into task-based learning and language assessment, Johann Fischer's paper, "The underlying action-oriented

and task-based approach of the CEFR and its implementation in language testing and assessment at university", offers a critical reflection of the underlying methodological approach of the CEFR as a framework document, which is defined as being "action-oriented" and task-based (Council of Europe 2001, 2018). In his view, the action-oriented approach of the CEFR and subsequent related documents do not give sufficient indication as to how it can be coherently applied to the area of assessment, or contextualised in such a way as to ensure that the test-taker is allowed to act as a "social agent" in a task-based context. In this vein, Fischer's contribution likewise discusses the relevance of applying constructive alignment as a tool with which to match methodology, practice and ensuing task-based assessment.

In her paper, "A Language Centre as a laboratory for innovation", Sabina Schaffner stresses the vital role of research as a component part of the activities of ULCs even though their academic institution may fail to give it due recognition and/or funding. Referring to ULCs as "laboratories of innovation", she outlines some design-based research that characterises the language centre she directs in Switzerland. In this light, she reports on how some decision-oriented research with regards to curriculum development of the learning/teaching process, contributed to the successful outcome of an experimental research project in Russian for heritage speakers that was subsequently applied to other languages, in this case Spanish. Furthermore, Schaffner shows how a survey was used among staff and students in order to lay the grounds for future co-operation in developing language skills in a proposed Writing Centre.

Concluding the section of invited authors, Liliana Szczuka-Dorna provides a diachronic overview of the growth of a ULC in Poland with her paper "The development of a Language Centre. An example of best practice in a historical perspective". As Szczuka-Dorna herself premises, her contribution may be read in 2 different ways, firstly in a historical perspective as a report providing facts and detailed information about how the Language Centre she directs came into being as far back as 1968. Secondly, taking inspiration from the details and inside information she provides concerning the challenges faced and overcome, the reader will see that the contribution serves as a guide for future ULCs which aspire to act as advocates in language education at both national and international levels.

Section 2 opens with the paper "Academic, cultural and social growth through the language of websites: a challenge for European University Language Centres", which presents itself as a challenge for the future. A research team comprising Carmen Argondizzo, A.M. De Bartolo, A. Fazio, J. Jimenez and I. Ruffolo bring together the concept of CercleS working as a CoP through the sharing of expertise. It discusses the importance of investigating how ULCs present concepts of intercultural communication, multilingualism, multiculturalism, social inclusion,

knowledge-sharing, creativity and language awareness through their actions, while focusing principally on the language used on their websites. The authors propose a potential project framework in which the CercleS community is invited to share ideas and experiential knowledge in representing itself and its mission to potential users. As a result, this paper can be interpreted as a "Call for Research" for members with the aim of joining forces and exploring cultural and linguistic academic contexts. This strengthens the concept introduced by Little (in this volume) that research has to be a major focus within the CercleS community in future years. This will empower the scientific aspect of its status but it will also pave the way towards the social aspect intended as quality growth for academic communities in relation to the wider community, such as students, academics, administrative personnel, schools, citizens in general.

In his paper, "An Evaluation of Culture Teaching and Learning in a Uniwide Language Program: Teachers' and Students' Perspectives", Mohamed Salwa presents a survey on teachers' and students' perceptions of the teaching of culture in language courses. The aim is to discover to what extent cultural growth, which may be developed in language classes, promotes students' intercultural competence and encourages them to become aware of the cultural diversity in their classes. Questionnaires were used to collect teachers and students' views about the project and about the importance of constant meaning negotiation, which is often necessary due to the complex nature of culture. Among other findings, the survey reveals that the learning of culture requires deliberate effort on the part of the learners to unlock the values and meanings behind the code.

Åsa Mickwitz and Marja Suojala's paper "Learner autonomy, self-regulation skills and self-efficacy beliefs – how can students' academic writing skills be supported?" focusses on how students develop academic writing skills in two different pedagogical settings: as autonomous learners and in a traditional learning environment. Their aim is to discover how this is associated with the students' self-regulatory strategies and self-efficacy beliefs. In the study, self-regulatory skills refer to the ability to take charge of, manage and organize the learning process, while self-efficacy beliefs are defined as the strength of students' confidence to accomplish an extensive task and sense of succeeding. The study shows that self-regulatory skills and self-efficacy beliefs have a greater impact on developing academic writing skills in more traditional learning settings than in learning settings where the students are supposed to work more independently, and where teacher support is not available to the same extent.

In their paper entitled "Enhancing assessment in the recognition of prior learning with digitalization", Annemarie Heinonen and Satu Tuomainen describe new developments in assessing students' non-formal and informal learning of English for Academic Purposes with an electronic examination system. Their hope

is that, through this systematic development process, the use of versatile and flexible teaching and assessment methods in more digitalized language centre contexts can be encouraged. Their study highlights how university students are increasingly comfortable with the use of computers for their study purposes, and many may prefer computer-based testing since it introduces a more efficient and secure assessment environment. Their message has the ultimate aim to encourage stakeholders towards an ever-increasing development of university pedagogy that may enhance opportunities for more fluent and continuous completion of HE studies.

Alice Spencer and Anna Bussi present "The University Language Centre as an Open-Badge Issuer", and in doing so they describe New Directions in ESP Assessment and Accreditation. They explain what an Open-Badge is and argue that Open Badge certifications are particularly suited to ESP courses, since they provide a record of specific hard and soft skills and of innovative teaching and learning practices. They strongly emphasize the "glocal" quality of these certifications since they are internationally recognized awards, while being tailored by local providers in response to local demands. They suggest that, although ESP learners need to be able to share their credentials on international platforms, using a common language, it is important that they do not lose sight of the specific characteristics of professional activities at a local level. They argue that the ULC is, in many ways, ideally suited to issue these kinds of certifications.

Continuing with issues related to assessment procedures, in their paper "Cognitive test anxiety in high-stakes oral examinations: face-to-face or computer-based" Alberto Andujar and Maria Soledad Cruz-Martínez take into consideration how face-to-face and computer-based examination formats affect test-takers' anxiety and consequently their language performance. Their experiment, which involved 176 candidates, analysed two speaking tests — face-to-face and computer-based — based on the ACLES B1 accreditation exam. The Cognitive Test Anxiety Scale Revised and a structured interview were used to measure students' anxiety as well as to observe their perceptions and individual behaviour, and how contextual characteristics and emotions may influence language test anxiety. Results indicated a moderate to high cognitive test anxiety on the part of participants and differences between the two contexts. In particular, factors such as the absence of an examiner and not feeling observed or judged during the speaking test performance were found to be aspects that lowered test-takers' anxiety levels. While describing details related to the experiment, the authors emphasize how such different aspects need to be taken into consideration by language test designers and evaluators when designing language tests in order to avoid weakening candidates' performance as well as to contribute to an appropriate representation of the test construct.

Jennifer Ament, Julia Barón-Páres and Carmen Pérez-Vidal, in their paper "Exploring the relationship between motivations, emotions and pragmatic marker use in English-medium instruction learners", return to the issue of EMI previously considered by Gotti in this volume. The aim of their study is twofold: firstly, it compares full-English-Medium Instruction (EMI) and semi-EMI learners on a series of motivational and emotional factors; secondly, it investigates the relationship between individual differences and pragmatic marker use. It is in fact their intention to provide further insights in relation to individual differences, in particular motivation and L2 learning experience among EMI students, as well as to identify incidental pragmatic marker learning. The main findings suggest that full-EMI programmes may not be more beneficial than semi-EMI ones in either motivating students or linguistic outcomes. The authors suggest that these findings should allow for more room for L1 education or other language education in the curriculum.

Section 2 ends with Sharon Chang's paper *Raciolinguistic Ideology in First-Year University (Non)Heritage Chinese Classes*, which poses the attention on the raciolinguistic ideology approach in educational settings. Based on a sound theoretical background, she alerts language educators and practitioners towards social-justice orientation, race, and ethnicity. Transnational communities become so significant for language teaching and learning in both the USA and European higher education settings. Indeed, the internationalisation process which has become so intense in European universities calls for an ethnolinguistic identity formation in relation to transnational communities. Through research carried out by means of a qualitative approach, Chang tries to provide an answer to the issue that many scholars have been highlighting in relation to raciolinguistic ideology, as communicated and shaped by language curriculum and instruction. Framed within a raciolinguistic approach, she investigates how identity transformation can be linked to social phenomena and reimagined through transgenerational agency, which is at the heart of a social justice language teacher education (Hawkins 2011). Chang's paper re-echoes Little's urge towards research into language learning as an essential component of European Language Centre activities.

The Section devoted to *Reports* is an example of ULCs in action. Beverly-Anne Carter in her paper "Taking research from periphery to core in a Caribbean Language Centre" describes how more recently a language centre in the Caribbean succeeded in moving from being labelled exclusively as a 'service unit' to being allowed to add a 'quality research' agenda parallel to that of its own academic institution and others farther afield. Her reports describe two experiences based on telecollaboration and language use in Spanish/English bilingual families. In particular, she outlines the relevance of the creation of a network which can foster the extramural connection and cooperation between a language

centre in the West Indies and CercleS, as a community of practice. Such associations, she affirms, have the invaluable role in helping more isolated language centres fulfil the role in the academy.

Focussing on the learner, Jaana Sorvari, S. Rusko, N. Jackson and H.L. Ainonen discuss activities related to "Language Teaching with an Arctic Attitude". They present two cases of collaborative language learning between students of Entrepreneurial Language Studies in Finland and students of Information Processing Science in Finland and Russia where the pedagogical approach is based on authentic language learning, creativity and self-efficacy with a view to developing flexibility in adapting skills in their future professions.

Thanks to the in-depth discussion offered in the fourteen papers, this Special Issue highlights the many challenges that CercleS and ULCs face in the future. ULCs will need to promote even further their activities transparently with a view to guiding both the language teacher and learner in all aspects of the teaching/learning process. Not to be underestimated is the promotional discourse of ULCs through their websites, for example, which should not merely serve to provide factual information and the logistics of the language courses available. Rather they should shed light on their status of institutional sectors, which, while promoting language learning, encourage the multicultural growth of learners of any age and of any professional sector, belonging to both the academic community and society in general. Indeed, ULCs need to interact constantly with their students in as many forms of communication as possible, by encouraging them in their goal, indicating the learning outcomes envisaged. Likewise, ULC professionals need to interact with colleagues at home and abroad by sharing know-how, joining forces to promote the multi-faceted aspects of language learning in the context of lifelong learning. *Language Learning in Higher Education* has played and will continue to play a leading role in this vision and perspective.

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