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THE ROLES OF LANGUAGE CENTRES IN MALAYSIA

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Abstract

Often disregarded as equal partners of academic faculties in universities and diminished to limited roles, the challenges faced by language centres abound. Therefore, this study is undertaken to explore the responsibilities of a language centre, as well as its commitments, as it interacts with other academic departments in a university. Focusing on language centre staff and university content lecturers from a university in Malaysia, this study explores the beliefs and attitudes of academic department lecturers towards language centre management and services as well how language centre lecturers view their positions in terms of students' language growth, research, etc. The results show that there seems to be disconnects and inadequacies in encouraging collaborations between lecturers in terms of teaching and learning and research ecosystem, resulting in unmet expectations from each other. The findings demonstrate that there is a need to harmonise language and academic department operations as they move towards achieving their institutional objectives.

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1. Introduction

Language centres first emerged as language laboratories in the first half of the 20th century and began to proliferate in the late 1950s and early 1960s (Kronenberg, 2014). Although language laboratories should not be considered the same as language centres, the use of technology was emphasised in the development of the language laboratories, which has had impact on the way language centres were established (Ruane, 2003).

Though it is still too early to say, and it may even appear as a blanket statement, language centres may have begun attaining acknowledgements now as an integral part of higher education institutions. Today, they unquestionably play a major role in meeting the challenges faced by higher learning institutions around the globe. However, despite the various roles and functions of language centres in higher education institutions, language centres sometimes are confronted with certain challenges such as the struggles to receive financial support and recognition from universities' management, the cause of which may stem from the vagueness of defining the primary focus of these language centres (Koblížková & Leeming, 2016). Many language centres are considered time and again as quintessentially teaching or servicing units by higher learning institutions, devoid of any obligations to commit to the field of research (Rontu & Tuomi, 2013).

Therefore, this research aims to explore the roles, functions, and management of language centres in contemporary higher education settings and to learn the beliefs and attitudes of university academic departments towards language centre management and services. This exploratory research will use a qualitative method approach to understand the roles, functions, and management of language centre at one research site as they aim to become more relevant and responsive to the needs of their founding agency. The results of the research will yield better understanding of the roles, functions, and management of language centres and thus strengthen the position of language centres as one of vital units in higher education institutions.

2. Problem Statement

Higher education institutions around the world including in Malaysia have been facing significant challenges. Among the challenges faced by the higher education institutions today are the spike or decline of enrolments, the availability of research funding, the quality of management and the role of private universities (Ruane, 2003). In Malaysian context, the rankings of local universities such as QS world university ranking and Times higher education world ranking are given much importance as these rankings may develop trust among top students from all over the world to choose Malaysia as their destination to pursue their higher education (Ashraf Fauzi et al., 2019).

This development has encouraged local universities to strive for excellence in various fields amongst which, scholarly activities as well as students and staff mobility have been given much emphasis. These agendas should be integrated in the orientation of language centres as they operate in higher institutions to offer significant contributions to the excellence rankings. According to Poljakovic (2011), the main function of language centres is inherently to provide education in terms of language as well as training for non-linguistic students. In a similar vein, Kareva and Heather (2018) stated that the

main function of language centre is to provide quality language education whether it is a part of general curriculum or for other non-language academic programmes. Aub-Buscher and Bickerton (2002, as cited in Pastor & Guillot, 2015) have outlined three types of language centres' activities which are:

- 1) Practical language training for non-language students
- 2) The use of appropriate technology for language learning
- 3) Research and development in the field of language teaching

A more recent function of language centres is to certify language levels of higher education institution students to prove their language competency for certain purposes such student mobility, graduation, and programme entry requirement (Orduna, 2013, as cited in Pastor & Guillot, 2015). Apart from those roles, Al-Maayta and Al-Zboon (2020) wrote that another important function of language centres is to inculcate the culture of respecting cultural diversity which can be realised by spreading awareness, promoting dialogue culture, and stressing on positive values.

All these roles are undoubtedly essential for any higher education institutions, and yet language centres are expected to tolerate being undermined and reduced to a unit meant for servicing only (Rontu & Tuomi, 2013). Language is inevitably organic as it adapts and evolves over time upon being utilised across various domains. Therefore, it is incumbent upon language lecturers to keep themselves updated with the latest knowledge by committing themselves in research related to language and linguistics in order to provide quality education for future generations. However, language centres often struggle to benefit from research policies set by universities as a result of having their primary focus vaguely defined (Koblížková & Leeming, 2016). Evidently, Overland and Sovacool (2020) pointed out that there is a significant imbalance in funding allocation for research fields related to social sciences and a study by Barrot (2017) corroborated this disparity wherein it was discovered that despite Southeast Asian (SEA) countries and universities exhibiting positive trend in research productivity and citations, they performed rather poorly in producing research publications related to language and linguistics. This observation suggests that the roles of language centres are after all reduced to overseeing language growth of students only.

Therefore, this paper aims to explore the functions of language centres from the perspective of academics in specific higher education settings and to learn the beliefs and attitudes of academic faculties towards language centres' management and services.

3. Research Questions

- i. What are the roles of language centres in specific higher education settings?
- ii. What are the beliefs and attitudes of university academic departments towards language centre management and services?

4. Purpose of the Study

- i. To explore the roles of language centres in specific higher education settings.

- ii. To learn the beliefs and attitudes of university academic departments towards language centre management and services

5. Research Methods

This research uses qualitative method where a focus group discussion was organised with two groups of respondents. The content lecturer group consisted of four (4) content lecturers teaching courses such, hotel and tourism management, business and management, communication and media studies, and accountancy. The second group consisted of three (3) language lecturers who serve at an institutional language centre. Both sets of respondents came from an English-medium university in Malaysia. The university is a state university, the campuses of which are scattered across the country.

The table below summarises the composition of the FGD groups, including the pseudonyms of the participants:

Table 1. Composition of the FGD groups

Public university language centre	Public university academic department
Alif	Elie
Azman	Lyn
Fay	Rose
	Anne

We conducted two separate FGD sessions for each group. On the one hand, the content lecturers were asked the following questions:

1. What are the current services that the language centre offers to your academic departments?
2. What are the types of services that you would want to have from language centre staff?

While on the other, the language lecturers answered the following questions:

1. What are the current programmes and services that your centre provides to university constituents?
2. What are the programmes and services that you would want to offer to the language centre clientele?

The participants' responses to the questions were taken as the sole basis with which the answers to the research questions were derived. As such, the participants' worldview became the basis of the themes that were generated in the study. The interview videos as recorded on Zoom were viewed multiple times for the initial codes, which were further analysed to determine emergent themes. The central themes were later identified as guided by the objectives of the study.

6. Findings

6.1. Collaborations on students' language growth

There appears to be a mismatch between courses offered by language centre such as English for Specific Purposes and English for Occupational Purposes and the expectations of content lecturers as the latter are of the opinion that approaches which are more individualised and collaborative should be devised to assist their students. Elie (pseudonym), a lecturer from the Hotel and Tourism Management programme said:

Elie: We would expect language vetting of assessments of our students. However, our university does not have a collaborative agenda.

This statement highlights the lack of collaboration between language and content lecturers within the domain of students' growth as language users. Elie is aware of the importance of lecturers working together to develop the language proficiency of their students and that this responsibility should not fall on language teachers alone. While it is true that courses offered by the language centre target the specific language needs of the students, be it academic or occupational in nature, taking them in isolation may not offer real value to students.

Anne (pseudonym) and Lyn (pseudonym), faculty members of Accountancy as well as Communication and Media Studies respectively, lay emphasis on co-curricular activities such as debate tournaments developed by both language and content lecturers to improve students' communication skills.

6.2. Collaborations on research

Scholarly activities such as conducting research is important to any universities. Collaboration across disciplinary boundaries is the latest trend lately in the field of higher education and research and academics are generally encouraged to trod along this path. Therefore, to gain insights on this topic, statements from FGD have been collected and analysed. Alif (pseudonym) and Fay (pseudonym) who are both language centre lecturers said the following, with respect to research:

Alif: We don't want to piggyback on faculty research whose topics do not clearly align with our expertise. Often, content lecturers see us as language proof-readers and would offer us to attach our names as co-writers in exchange for language checking.

Fay: Some faculty researchers would come to us for help with language checking, but they do it on a personal level because we do not have a formal proofreading service at the language centre.

Despite indications that there were attempts by content lecturers to collaborate with language lecturers on conducting research, it often led to language lecturers being assigned minor roles such as language reviewers only. It might have to do with the fact that most of the studies were headed by content lecturers who might not have clear ideas to incorporate the expertise of language lecturers into their

research or the subject matter of their research might be predominantly hardly related to language and linguistics in the first place. To further compound the issue, there were content lecturers who approached language lecturers solely for the purpose of asking the latter to be proof-readers from the very beginning on the pretext of research collaboration. Lyn (pseudonym), a faculty member from the Communication and Media Studies program addressed this sentiment too when she said that language lecturers are especially in demand when it comes to reviewing language accuracy of their research papers.

Lyn: We want our research papers and other academic writing output proofread by the language centre. It would also be good to access a translation service from the language centre.

Notwithstanding, Rose (pseudonym) of the Business and Management programme said that, given the right opportunity, content lecturers are more than interested to make language lecturers as active participants or co-creators in their research papers. A transdisciplinary collaboration of such category is highly valuable in academia, after all. Perhaps, aside from the right opportunity, what both content and language lecturers need the most when it comes to interdisciplinary research is clear directive on the role each researcher should take when collaborating to prevent a lopsided partnership.

6.3. Collaboration hurdles

Overall, analysis of the interview reveals that academic staff in general have the inclination to embark on cross-fields studies, having realised how valuable they can be. Nevertheless, often they find themselves in a situation wherein the collaboration between content and language lecturers falls into either of these two predicaments: (1) unsubstantial contribution and (2) unfamiliar domains. Unsubstantial contribution is when the responsibility of a research partner is reduced to, though essential, tasks which are hardly related to the research topic such as correcting language accuracy of a research paper. The relationship between the researchers is exploitative in nature rather than collaborative as there exists little to no exchange of knowledge nor expansion of body of knowledge between different fields of study. Unfamiliar domains are the second predicament identified in which it may involve researchers being uncertain with research topics at hand and what each member of a research group can bring to the table. All these uncertainties, when not addressed, often lead to attenuation of interest and contributions in a research collaboration.

These are some of the incongruencies or disjoints in collaborative programmes uncovered from the interview with the FGD. Thoroughly reviewing existing terms of directives and domains for collaboration, providing codification of practices and expertise which are readily available, and supporting lecturers who are interested to work across fields in conducting research may strengthen the collaborative agenda of inter-department units in universities.

6.4. Implications on language centres

Based on further analysis of the data extracted from the FGD, the roles of language centres are indeed vital to make headway through which genuine collaborative works between academics can be accomplished. Though it might entail a willingness to compromise on the part of language centres,

decentralising language centres to different faculties may alleviate the issues of collaboration hurdles as language lecturers can be more exposed to the research areas and agendas of each faculty; hence, maximising the expertise of both language and content lecturers. With respect to students' language growth, the curriculum for language skills of each faculty also may be more specific and specially tailored according to their actual needs, instead of scratching the surface only. For example, for the subject English for Occupational Purposes offered under the Faculty of Hotel and Tourism Management, students can be exposed to authentic uses of language related to hospitality.

Furthermore, the fact that proofreading is a much sought-after service as evidenced from the statements by the FDG, language centres may contribute to improving this situation by institutionalising proofreading, or even translation for that matter, as a formal service offered to other faculties. This will work in their favour too as academic departments lately are mostly required to generate income for universities as part of their Key Performance Index (KPI). Establishing a formal body to oversee these language-related scholarly activities may benefit students too as those interested can be trained to be full-fledged proof-readers or translators once they graduate.

6.5. Implications on sustainability

It came as no surprise that education is named amongst the agendas in Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) laid out by United Nations, the undergirding concept of which is ensuring “inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all” (United Nations, 2020). The concept of sustainability does not just involve the environmental but also the social, and economic spheres of the human condition; and education, being an intrinsic part of human development, is duly urged to be developed within sustainability premise.

Humanity might not have gotten closer to global sustainability yet (Shrivastava et al., 2020), but as academia are starting to catch on this sustainability agenda, language centres must rally support from their respective university's academics and administrative departments to have their operating principles run in parallel to university's pursuit of this developmental goal. This support mechanism can come in many forms such as research funding and networking as well as establishing community and industrial linkages for the academic staff. As a matter of fact, allocation of research fundings often does not work in favour of social sciences despite the fact that this domain may be holding the key to contribute sufficiently to the global transition of sustainability (Baum & Bartkowski, 2020; Overland & Sovacool, 2020; Shrivastava et al., 2020).

With enough funding, language centres in universities possess huge potential to initiate positive social and environmental transformation at global level as their research domain can be anchored on interdisciplinary orientation through which intricate problems related to culture, institution, and human behaviour can be better addressed (Shrivastava et al., 2020). The mistake so far has been on perceiving that sustainability is an exclusive domain of certain disciplines only; hence, crippling the understanding and development of solutions to the challenges faced in accomplishing quality education (Baum & Bartkowski, 2020). Moreover, to perpetuate lifelong learning opportunities, language centres cannot afford to turn their back on engagement with society and industry players. Gone were the days when scholarly activities were a one-way street to benefit academia only. For example, service provisions such

a proofreading should not be an end-in-itself, rather a learning opportunity from which fellow lecturers or even the community, if made open for public, may benefit in the long run. Conversely, the engagement with the implicated communities may inspire more valuable research and as for content lecturers, they may provide trainings for language lecturers on research designs and methodologies that are of interest to the latter for the purpose of cross-fields research. Renewed policies on the research ecosystem of universities are then needed to back language centres to be equal partner of other academic departments in research collaborations.

7. Conclusion

This paper investigated language centres' operations vis-à-vis their roles in a contemporary university setting especially in terms of students' language growth and scholarly activities. It was discovered that there were incongruities with respect to how language centres are expected to function and how they actually function. Collaborative engagements too were left wanting in several departments. Language centres need to be prompted to be more proactive in ensuring that this academic unit is as significant as other faculties and must be more responsive to the needs of their founding agencies and societies alike. Sustained interdisciplinary efforts must be explored and initiated to achieve excellence in teaching, research ecosystem, and faculty development efforts. Dismissing language centres their entitlements to establish significant roles in universities' operations will only be detrimental for our social and environmental change.

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