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CercleS Guide on Language Teaching and Learning in Higher Education

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1 Background

1.1 CercleS Survey “Impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on Language Teaching in Higher Education”

This Policy Paper results from the CercleS Survey “Impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on Language Teaching in Higher Education”, conducted between 30 March and 6 May 2021. The goal of the research was to identify the conditions and forms of delivery of language teaching and learning in Higher Education during the COVID-19 pandemic, to define quality criteria of the different modes of language teaching and learning, and to inform future planning of CercleS training and development activities. A working group analysed the results from two separate questionnaires – addressing teaching and management staff respectively – and shared the outcomes with the CercleS community at a webinar at the end of June 2021.² The results were also shared at international conferences in October and November 2021. Workshops were also held on the didactic implications for future language teaching in Higher Education (October 2021) and on a Policy Statement based on the survey outcomes (November). This paper takes into account the results of these workshops. The final version was presented at the CercleS Conference in Porto in September 2022.

1.2 Trends in Higher Education

Language centres in Higher Education are affected by the developments and challenges of university teaching, which respond to national and international trends and changes in the higher education landscape - and also inevitably to the consequences of the COVID 19 pandemic.

Even before the pandemic, the goals and organisation of **university teaching** were becoming **more open and diverse** as reflected in the European University Association ([EUA](#)) [vision document "Universities without walls" \(February 2021\)](#).

In a further [document published on 18 January 2022](#), the EU Commission promotes **integration, permeability and inter-institutional networking** in the European Higher Education Area; through which **new higher education alliances are setting up joint "virtual campuses"**, sharing their online learning resources, and enabling new (virtual) forms of mobility.

Changes in student mobility and trends such as the development of inter-university "virtual campuses" have an impact on the provisions to be offered by language centres in Higher Education. A university language centre can contribute to the context of an "open university" when it comes to the inclusion of different (international) student groups, such as those with a refugee background. Furthermore, the pandemic in particular has shown that language teaching, through its focus on social interaction, makes an important contribution to socialisation and to student "well-being" in the university context.

² A recording of the webinar is available on the CercleS YouTube channel (<https://youtu.be/4BNoy5DWrVY>).

1.3 Selected research on modes of delivery

Research in higher education teaching and learning

Research in and about higher education suggests that, in principle, modes of delivery with blended learning are more effective than purely face-to-face or purely online teaching since they combine the advantages of both physical and virtual spaces, as well as synchronous and asynchronous settings.

Otherwise, the effectiveness of blended and online teaching varies depending on the performance of the lecturers, the competences of the learners (e.g. the ability to organise themselves), and the course level. Whichever the case, the mode of delivery has an impact on students' well-being and their sense of social belonging to the learning group and the university (Petchey, Schmid, Niebert, Petko 2021).

Language education research comes to a similar conclusion when examining the interaction between members of the learning community and the **role design** and **rapport building** relevant to both face-to-face and online settings (Senior 2010).

Recent research on online language teaching through COVID-19 suggests that online teaching is strongly influenced not only by technical skills but also by the **self-efficacy** of both lecturers and students. Due to the importance of positive emotions for language acquisition, individualisation is listed as a potential strength of online teaching if lecturers manage to support weaker students more readily than through face-to-face teaching (Maican, Cocoradă 2021).

From a student perspective, the **elimination of the need to travel** to the university, the possibility to take more frequent breaks, and the perceived lower level of control by the lecturer are seen as **positive features of online learning**. Furthermore, research also shows that students value the **choice of their own learning pace in asynchronous online learning** (Almarzooq et al. 2020). However, the **absence of the usual daily structure** and interpersonal contacts can **trigger anxiety** for some students and have a detrimental effect on learning (Kim and Asbury 2020). Synchronous and highly interactive courses can play a compensatory role here.

From a teacher perspective, **effective online learning** requires the lecturers to **structure the learning events** in a way that is time-consuming (Primdahl et al. 2021) and requires intensive support for the students (Sugino 2021).

The above findings are further supported by the following research papers:

- The combination of digital learning elements and face-to-face teaching is generally welcomed (Zamborová 2021).
- From a group dynamic point of view, the lack of direct interaction (Jansem 2021) and the delayed reaction time (Adnan and Anwar 2020) have a detrimental effect on learning.
- Delayed feedback can also inhibit the development of speaking skills (Frydrychova Klimova 2014).

This paper will therefore discuss certain recommendations for the future.

2 Modes of delivery of language teaching

2.1 Definition of modes of delivery

In the CercleS survey, respondents were asked to comment on modes of delivery of language classes. Acknowledging the different terminology used across the CercleS network, we adopted the following definition:

- Face to Face (F2F) classes: in person lessons taking place in a classroom
- Web-enhanced classes: F2F lessons, integrated with the use of a Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) (e.g., Moodle)
- Online remote classes: synchronous online lessons with the use of a videoconference system (e.g., Zoom)
- Blended learning: >50% of the course delivered online and the rest F2F
- Hybrid asynchronous: F2F lessons AND autonomous self-study activities for students
- Hybrid synchronous: F2F lessons AND online teaching.

2.2 Pedagogic and practical considerations, and personnel management and leadership implications for organising different modes of delivery of language teaching

The aim of this section is to reflect on the lessons learnt and apply them to move forward. The results of the CercleS Survey, and of the teachers and managers workshops will be considered, and a list of considerations for the future will be presented. Acknowledging the different reality in each European language centre, the list of considerations is conceived as general guidance, rather than a proscriptive list of parameters.

2.2.1 Pedagogic considerations to be applied to different modes of delivery of language teaching

Modes of delivery

The advantages of the different modes of delivery are identified as follows:

Face to Face delivery

F2F teaching has its advantages, namely:

- Social interactions can be organised with fewer technical interventions, resulting in better rapport with individual students and better group dynamics
- Speaking skills are better taught in a F2F class, making F2F more appropriate to lower level learners
- Body language is more evident in a F2F class, and contributes to the development of intercultural skills.

Web-enhanced delivery (F2F and VLE, e.g., Moodle)

The use of a VLE to enhance F2F teaching has its advantages, namely:

- It offers an effective extension or reinforcement of class work, or the opportunity to 'flip the class'
- It encourages peer to peer learning
- It offers students flexibility in relation to when and where materials are accessed.

Online remote (using synchronous videoconference system)

Online remote teaching has its advantages, namely:

- Classes can be accessed from any location, potentially increasing the diversity of students
- Students can develop additional skills (e.g. digital skills, presentation skills)
- Assessments have the potential to be more student-centric, and to test more than 'just' language skills (e.g. use of online translation tools).

Blended learning (>50% of course delivered online, rest F2F)

Blended learning has its advantages, namely:

- The personalisation of learning, as students can choose materials relevant to their needs
- Inclusivity, as preference for both online and F2F delivery is accommodated
- More time to develop speaking and listening skills (e.g. students can record their speaking online, hence improving their accuracy and fluency, or be exposed to different accents through online materials).

Hybrid asynchronous (F2F classroom and online asynchronous teaching)

Hybrid asynchronous teaching has its advantages, namely:

- Flexible peer learning: students can flexibly participate in asynchronous peer to peer activity.

Hybrid synchronous (F2F classroom and online synchronous teaching)

Hybrid asynchronous teaching has its advantages, namely:

- Students can choose whether to attend classes online or F2F, making the learning more inclusive and accessible.

Moving forward

Reflecting on the lessons learnt, a list of considerations follows. The aim is to ensure that language teaching and learning in European Higher Education institutions remains suitable for students' needs and expectations. The considerations are divided in topics.

Interactions

Student interaction. Consider:

- How to foster student to teacher interactions in all modes of delivery, both to maximise learning and to monitor students' wellbeing
- How peer to peer interactions can be fostered to maximise learning in all modes of delivery
- How to maximise student speaking time in all modes of delivery
- How to make asynchronous activities as interactive and engaging as possible, in order to maximise students' participation
- How to incentivise students to participate in asynchronous activities, in order to maximise learning: for example, by making engagement in asynchronous activities part of the final mark or by asking students to complete a task together.

Staff interaction. Consider:

- How to support the creation of professional learning communities for a more effective exchange of resources and expertise.

Training required

Training for students. Consider:

- How to foster students' level of digital competence (i.e. is there a need to develop critical digital skills, or to discuss online plagiarism?)
- How to support students in developing self-study skills and to take advantage of available online materials
- How to develop students' autonomy in language learning.

Training for staff. Consider:

- If training is needed to teach online, especially in the various hybrid teaching modes
- If the online resources and tools used in teaching are pedagogically sound
- How to keep materials interactive, relevant, and up-to-date, especially if students need to engage with them asynchronously
- How to embed intercultural skills in language teaching and learning.

Programme considerations. Consider:

- If it is possible to teach the majority of lower-level classes F2F
- What is tested in assessments, how, and their contribution to the development of graduate attributes.

Technical considerations. Consider:

- If the students and staff can access on-line platforms without problems at all times
- If students and staff have sufficient technical knowledge to succeed through online learning and teaching.

2.2.2 Personnel management implications

In the CercleS survey, and in the workshops with teachers and managers, participants identified the following implications to personnel management, caused by the changes in language teaching and learning during the COVID-19 pandemic:

- An increase in hours of work due to online teaching, making redundant the conventional workload model based on contact hours and / or number of students
- A need to provide all staff with technical equipment (hardware and software)
- A need to train staff: moving from training for emergency online teaching as conducted in Spring 2020 to pedagogically informed online teaching for the long-term.

Moving forward

Reflecting on the lessons learnt, follows a list of considerations in relation to personnel management. The considerations are divided in topics.

Workload and contracts. Consider:

- The extra 'hidden work' required to teach online: adaptation of resources to different modes of delivery, time for training in the use new online tools and IT equipment, increased students' needs (e.g. more emails received when teaching is online)

- How to adapt the workload to include the preparation of and for the online environment and the mentoring of students, moving away from the idea of a workload based on contact hours
- If it is possible to increase contractual hours to permanent staff and/or offer guarantees to freelance teachers.

Training needs. Consider:

What training your team needs, and how to provide it. The following training needs have been identified:

- Curriculum development: how to redesign syllabus for online, blended and hybrid teaching; for example, preparing engaging student activities for asynchronous work
- Technical skills: how to select the best tools for online, blended and hybrid language teaching
- Creating suitable online environments, including:
 - a) how to negotiate a code of conduct with the students (e.g. use of the camera)
 - b) how to communicate with students in synchronous hybrid teaching.

2.2.3 Leadership implications

In the CercleS survey, and in the workshops with managers, participants identified the following implications for leadership, caused by the changes in working practices during the COVID-19 pandemic:

Moving forward

Reflecting on the lessons learnt, follows a list of considerations in relation leadership in Language Centres. The considerations are divided in topics.

Teambuilding and team culture. Consider:

The importance of a team culture and of creating a sense of belonging, for the benefit of staff well-being and staff retention. In particular:

- How to re-create pre-Covid social interactions or, if not possible, how to identify different ways of bonding to ensure the unity of the team.

Teacher identity. Consider:

How to reassure teachers in accepting and embracing a new identity as:

- A facilitator of learning
- An enabler of peer-to-peer learning
- An advisor for students' autonomy in language learning
- A provider of suitable and valuable resources for student learning
- A de-facto intercultural competence trainer.

3 International cooperation

3.1 New opportunities and added value for students and staff of collaboration between LCs in HE to be promoted

The move to on-line teaching as a result of the pandemic has opened up opportunities for greater on-line collaboration across the CercleS network. The survey has identified a number of such opportunities that can be pursued to the benefit of CercleS members, linked to teaching and learning and staff development. In particular these can be taken up where the benefits of international collaboration at the European level are clear:

Teaching and learning

- Interest in virtual classrooms being offered
- Defining the best formats and methodologies to maximise student motivation (both before and during courses)
- Embedding digital learning techniques into existing course formats
- On-line tandem and Telecollaboration, including for international students)
- Jointly delivered or blended intercultural competence courses / classes
- Offer or open up already existing language courses to other centres (e.g. to allow access to less widely taught languages)
- Development of a consistent approach to support language centres in the development of Internationalisation at Home activities
- Jointly taught modules in a given language for non native language learners
- Opening new classes, tutored workshops, or asynchronous learning facilities to students across the CercleS network.

Many of the activities described are already being delivered, but usually in isolated circumstances involving only a small number of institutions. The opportunities now available are to consider how this can be scaled up to be more widely accessible across the network with more members taking advantage of such international collaboration opportunities.

Teacher training and development

- Sharing training and development between language centres (allowing better access to expertise where this might not be available in individual member institutions)
- Peer coaching
- Virtual job shadowing of teaching
- Delivery of guest lectures and seminars on topics of mutual interest to maximise access to, and dissemination of expertise and research
- Virtual staff exchange (e.g. for teachers of the same language)
- International language meeting opportunities (cafés) for staff.

3.2 Implications regarding management (workload, teaching hours, technical, training and development, other)

There are of course a number of implications associated with increased on-line activity and interaction. This will need to be factored into planning in terms of considering the added

value of such activities, some form of cost-benefit analysis, or how such on-line activities can be delivered in addition to, to replace, or to improve upon existing in-person activities.

The following implications need to be considered:

- Acknowledgement of workload requirements
- Need for additional training for staff
- Language centre Directors' need to share best practice and resource to support a growing role for all language centres in internationalisation
- Need for careful quality assurance, including effective development and delivery of content
- Need to conceive all activities regarding student needs and the role of language centres in the process of internationalisation within their universities
- Requirement for accreditation and/or award of credits for students by the institution
- Challenges in assured access to technical resources, security of access, and the technical challenges of enrolment to courses and other activities
- Requirements to review access to bespoke digital pedagogical content, and wider awareness of new and effective language learning technologies
- Integration of these collaborative international activities into existing language centres tasks
- Financial implications in terms of running some on-line courses, especially in new areas, to ensure financial value and sustainability
- Legal considerations in individual Universities (such as any constitution or guidelines governing the role or management of the language centre).

3.3 Support needed from university management (financial, technical, personnel planning, other)

The international opportunities available to language centres will of course require some support from senior management within the University. This will include:

- IT support
- Financial resources (where required and not available through external grants)
- Recognition of the collective expertise both within the language centre and across CercleS
- Assured access to staff exchange programmes (Erasmus, etc.)
- Support for institutional partnerships where a formal agreement may be required.

3.4 Specific teacher training programmes, webinars, workshops to be promoted by CercleS

As a result of the survey, CercleS will aim to promote training programmes available across the network. These may include:

- Adaptation of digital environments to our teaching experience and our needs
- Practical approaches to teaching across different platforms, different courses, teaching with a balance of synchronous and asynchronous formats, and teaching shared between institutions, all based on teachers' experience
- Successful trouble-shooting, and online teaching activities' design
- Training for language centre professionals (awareness of intercultural issues)

- Working group on descriptors for intercultural competences
- Need for training in quality assurance across different modes of delivery.

The design of a CercleS training programme will inevitably be a collaborative exercise, the intention being to create occasions for networking and peer learning for teachers where they can also share and develop ideas for cooperation.

- There will be a CercleS platform to collect suggestions for relevant workshop topics and coordinators
- A list of courses proposed by member universities will be made available for participation
- Language centre managers would be asked to support attendance at international workshops by their staff
- Collaboration profiles will be made available to managers on the CercleS website
- CercleS will cooperate with national associations to promote international spaces within national conferences
- We will consider the integration of CercleS workshops within new or pre-existing national association teacher training programmes.

All the above will be considered with application of pedagogy at the forefront - ahead of technology, and maximising the synergies between language centres to save resource, save time, and to gain access to expertise that may otherwise not be available.

Literature

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