

**"THERE'S NOTHING AS PRACTICAL AS A
GOOD THEORY" :
RESEARCH, TEACHING AND LEARNING
FUNCTIONS OF LANGUAGE CENTRES**

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RESUME

Une analyse des fonctions remplies par une vingtaine d'institutions qui portent le terme "centre de langues" ou "centre linguistique" dans leur intitulé, permet de dresser une liste descriptive de celles-ci. Les fonctions principales identifiées sont :

- (i) La recherche
- (ii) La diffusion et la vulgarisation de la recherche
- (iii) L'information
- (iv) La formation des apprenants et des chercheurs-enseignants
- (v) L'enseignement
- (vi) La mise à disposition des ressources et des matériaux.

Chacune de ces fonctions est discutée à l'aide de concepts issus de la sociologie du savoir.

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INTRODUCTION

There is an old story about a doctor who came home late one night after doing his rounds to find his wife angrily waiting for him.

"Is something wrong, my dear?" he asked anxiously.

"There certainly is", his wife replied. "The WC is blocked".

"Oh dear, oh dear. Well, never mind. I'll call the plumber first thing in the morning".

"I can't wait till then! Anyway, when the plumber needs you, he doesn't think twice about calling you out at night";

So the doctor called the plumber and the plumber came. When the doctor explained what the problem was, the plumber expostulated:

"Do you mean to say you got me out of bed in the middle of the night just because of a blocked WC?"

"Well, you got me out of bed in the middle of the night for an ordinary flu", said the doctor.

The plumber was silent for a second, then he sighed and said:

"OK, let's have a look at it, then". The doctor led the way to the toilet.

The plumber looked at it thoughtfully, his hand on the cistern, and then he opened his toolbag and took out a packet of aspirins.

"It's not serious", he said. He took out two aspirin tablets, threw them into the bowl of the WC and went on:

"There you are, that should do the trick. If it's not better in the morning give me a ring and I'll see what else I can do. That'll be £ 15, please. Good night".

Silly though it is, this story makes a number of points:

The first is that when you have a problem it is not necessarily a good idea to call in an expert immediately. You need to get your timing right.

Secondly, you should check on whether he is going to use it to his own private advantage.

The third and most important point is that general, all-purpose solutions may be completely inappropriate and ineffective in your particular case.

It is this third point which I would now like to develop, since I want to avoid giving the impression that there is any such thing as an 'ideal' language centre.

Only if centres are conceived and managed in ways which take into account local needs, interests and constraints is there any chance of them making a useful contribution to the institution of which they are a part and to the lives of the individuals – staff and students – connected with them. Clearly, different institutions and people have different needs, interests and constraints:

LEARNERS differ both as learners (learning style, motivation etc.) and in terms of their objectives.

TEACHERS AND STAFF differ as regards their fields of interest and competence and as regards their work-loads and working conditions.

INSTITUTIONS differ as to their aims as well as their academic, administrative and financial priorities.

In brief, then, language centres are 'context embedded' and any attempt to describe their meaning and functions must take into account the wider situation of which they form a part. So any attempt to develop a panacea, an ideal centre, however well-intentioned and, indeed, however well-researched, is bound to fail. It also follows that the idea of a language centre which does not do research is a nonsense, a contradiction in terms, since only research will allow the identification of and adaptation to local needs, interests and constraints. I shall return to the problem later.

In view of what has been said, it will be clear, I hope, why it is simply not useful to try to define what a university language centre "is". The essentialist approach here, as elsewhere in the social sciences (Janicki, 1988) simply leads to endless and fruitless terminological quibbling. Instead, I propose to adopt a functional approach: in other words, instead of asking what some notional language centre is or should be, I will be asking what language centres, real ones, actually do.

What immediately strikes the person who asks this question is the wide variety of replies. Language centres certainly do not all do the same things. Indeed, it is quite possible to find two language centres -- that is, institutions bearing that name -- which have no common functions, no shared field of activity.

Table 1 is a list of the fields in which a number of language centres are active. It is probably not exhaustive and it is certainly not meant to be taken prescriptively - "This is what every language centre should aim at doing". Apart from practical limitations (the size of the budget or the staff, for example) it sometimes makes perfectly good sense for a centre to concentrate on such and such a field. There is at least one centre, for example, which is almost exclusively a centre for pure research and has no teaching or library service on any kind.

I will be situating any comments on Table 1 within the general framework of the sociology of knowledge (Schutz, 1962-1967 ; Mannheim, 1936) especially as that theory relates to the role of language in the categorisation and maintenance of social reality (Berger and Luchmann, 1966 ; Cicourel, 1974). Clearly, any language centre represents an institutional intervention in that process and as such its role cannot be described adequately without taking into account the nature of that intervention i.e its role in the distribution of knowledge throughout the social matrix. Indeed, only when language teaching and learning activities as a whole are conceptualised as a systematics for managing the negotiation of social knowledge through discourse, will it be possible to regard language didactics as an autonomous and consistent discipline, rather than as a patchwork of interdisciplines.

1 - RESEARCH

Not all language centres do research, in the sense of having institutional projects bearing labels with the word "research" ('study', 'investigation', etc) in their titles. However, there are a number of activities which, while they are not actually called research, deserve to be, in that they are serious attempts to solve problems, further understanding and improve performance. Examples would be tasks such as materials production or the management of self-access systems, neither of which is usually considered "noble" or "academic" enough to count as research.

Yet these tasks form an important part of most modern language teaching programmes and they require serious thought to be given to topics such as, for example, needs analysis and learning style. Needs analysis implies, at the very least, a solid grounding in the pragmatics of discourse as well as the conceptual and methodological tools for transforming the insights of discourse analysis into something which is useful to teachers and learners. Learning style implies, at the very least, the development of techniques for the observation and analysis of fundamental cognitive processes.

In other words, the management of self-access systems and the production of materials, if they are done properly, that is, in ways which take into account the specific characteristics of the people who are going to use them, necessarily entail the study of a wide range of social, linguistic and cognitive issues. Indeed, I feel that it is only by approaching such tasks as research that they can ever be carried out effectively and that to deny them the status of research is tantamount to saying that there can be no such thing as research in the field of language didactics in general.

Yet this is exactly what a certain number of people do say. Their argument is that self-access systems, materials production and the like cannot be considered as research because they are part of language teaching and learning, activities which are felt to be subsequent and therefore inferior to research. There is a considerable amount of confused thinking here, often aggravated by the individual's own academic background – physicists finding linguistic research unscientific, literary scholars finding it "too scientific" – and by ignorance of the relevant literature.

Paradoxically, this ignorance is often justified by the claim that "language teaching is an art" – a perfectly honorable and tenable belief but surely not one which should be used to preclude all further reflection and investigation. This "don't confuse me with the facts" attitude often masquerades as a sort of beleaguered humanism but is really only a lazy obscurantism, as can be seen by the interest the great humanists (Bacon and Milton, for example) took in educational and linguistic matters. This objection would be annoying but intellectually trivial were it not for the fact that it is sometimes enshrined or fossilised in academic structures.

For example, the "nomenclature des disciplines" of the CNRS (Centre National de Recherche Scientifique) contains no entry for language didactics (applied linguistics, language teaching). It simply does not exist as a valid field of research : the intellectual insinuations are as clear as the implications for individual and institutional advancement. Not that France is alone in this matter : I know of a case where the director of a very large language centre, author of a Ph. D and an important book on discourse analysis, was refused promotion to the rank of professor because "the post does not involve research". The person concerned is now preparing a second Ph. D. on colonial literature, a topic which is apparently better suited to the rigours of academic inquiry.

A second objection to the broad interpretation of pedagogical research which I have proposed goes like this : "Oh well, if you are going to call materials production and self-access and that sort of thing research, where do you stop? You might as well say, for example, that every time a teacher steps into a classroom he or she is doing research".

To which I can only reply "Quite". I see very little essential difference between good teaching and research. I will return to this topic later when we turn to different modes of research. For the moment, I will limit myself to the observation that it would be disastrous if the idea got around that research was something that can only be done by researchers in research centres. This is the white-coat mentality :

leave it to the scientists. Not only is this mentality socially dangerous, it is unscientific. The whole thrust of recent work in the social sciences is towards a more phenomenological approach, participant observation and fieldwork. One does not need to go so far as to reject completely the physical science paradigm : there will continue to be a place for quantitative and empirical methods. But we are working in the social sciences and the objects we study are social objects, such as "marriage", "lies", "an appointment", "the boss", "an apology", "a language centre", which, unlike physical objects such as stones, plants or animals, only exist by virtue of our social behaviour and language. Now whereas physical objects can often be plucked from their environments and examined in a laboratory without too much damage, this is notoriously not true of social objects. Remove them from their environments and they cease to exist.

Let us now look briefly, then, at a number of research modes. My reason for starting here is that, in my experience nothing does more to determine the character of a language centre than its choice of mode or modes. The sorts of activities, the kinds of questions asked, the ethos and even the atmosphere in the most general sense all seem to depend largely on this choice.

The list of research modes I have drawn up in Table 1 is precisely that – a list. It is not a careful taxonomy : the categories and criteria are not consistent and there are overlaps between the different modes. Nonetheless, it does seem to me to cover the most common modes or approaches adopted in universities :

1.1. Pure research

Pure research is usually thought of in terms of research for its own sake, the altruistic quest for knowledge. It is not carried out in the expectation of short-term, practical returns. This does not mean that pure research does not contribute sometimes to the understanding of linguistic or pedagogical matters, but it does mean that a pure research project will not be judged as a success or a failure on that basis.

Examples of pure research topics which come to mind are : language typology, communicative networks in bilingual families and cognitive models.

Such projects are necessarily theory-driven, that is the starting-point is theoretical and experiments and observations are carried out to test hypotheses derived from the theoretical framework in question.

1.2. Applied research

The word application here is an ambiguous one : are we talking about applications of or applications to ? In other words, are we applying a theory or aiming at a specific, non-theoretical outcome, a practical objective of some kind ?

Obviously, in the present context it is the expression "applied linguistics" which comes to mind. But as Henry Widdows on has pointed out, the ambiguity, is still there between "linguistics applied" and "applied linguistics", between the application of a theory and the creation and recognition of an autonomous discipline, having as its object of study the teaching and learning of languages. It is this second ambition which has led in recent years to the rejection in some countries of the expression "applied linguistics" because it is seen as implying a hegemony of linguistic theory over pedagogical practise.

1.3. Action research

Louis PORCHER has objected to the term "action research" because it gives the impression that other modes are forms of "inaction research". Although action research is the preferred mode at the CRAPEL, we are certainly not opposed to or uninterested in other modes. It just happens to be the one that suits us best.

Basically, action research is a way of identifying and selecting areas to be investigated, of putting your finger on what things need doing and in what order. It starts, then, not from a theoretical premise, but from the awareness of a problem somewhere in the learning situation (in a classroom, in a self-access centre, for a group or an individual, etc.). By its very nature, action research deals with real problems and real learners. This in turn implies that the centre has access to them, which obviously entails teaching and training functions of some kind, either within the centre itself (i.e. the centre runs various courses and learning schemes) or through the centre's intervention in other institutions (university language departments, on-site courses in hospitals, offices and factories, schools, etc) see Table 1, Section 5).

Another characteristic of action research is that projects which are defined and run in this way can only last as long as the problem or the group of learners with the problem, lasts. For example, if a group of Danish teachers of French is only in France for three months, then the life-span of any project bearing on them or their course will be limited to three months, plus advance warning, plus time for debriefing and analysis. This will tend to produce a multiplicity of short-term projects, rather than a small number of long-term projects. However, it should also be remembered that there are problems which are common to many different groups, especially at higher levels of generalisation such as "written expression" or "pronunciation".

Action research, then, is not theory-driven, in the sense that projects are not selected for their theoretical interest alone. However, this certainly does not mean that action research is atheoretical. In fact, it requires a considerable body of theory to provide the framework for the adequate identification and analysis of a very wide range of problems. This is one of the ways in which the teacher is like the researcher. I do not just mean that the teacher is continually engaged in action research, though that is quite true : every time a teacher looks for the best way to explain such and such a point to a learner, he or she is doing didactic research. The same is true when it comes to looking for suitable materials for a particular group or developing an activity that corresponds to a particular need. Even more important, however, is the fact that for both teacher and researcher "there is nothing as practical as a good theory". Only on the basis of a general theory can one identify and analyse – conceptualise – specific problems. And only a theory allows us to generate hypotheses, design experiments and evaluate results.

If I seem to insist on this point, it is because some teachers, like some researchers, like to imagine they can manage without theory. "I am just a practical person, working at the chalk-face with no time for all that airy waffle". But of course no responsible teacher goes into a class without any idea of what he or she is going to do and the second we decide to do one thing rather than another we have embarked on the royal road to theory. Selecting activity A rather than activity B or C or D implies that we have criteria of selection and criteria are eminently theoretical constructs. The researcher or teacher who says "I have no theory" is fooling him or herself.

In this respect, I am reminded of a quotation by the economist John Maynard Keynes, who said :

"Practical men, who believe themselves to be quite exempt from any intellectual influences, are usually the slaves of some defunct economist".

1.4. Academic research

By academic research, I mean research which leads to some form of certification, either for the individuals or for the institution concerned, such as M.A.'s, and Ph.D's or, particularly in the early days of the institution's existence, official recognition and funding.

This can be an excellent way of finding and training new researchers. For example, at the CRAPEL this year we have seven first-year doctoral students attached to various research groups. I do not think we have ever had a case where such students have not made a useful contribution to "their" projects and of course, we like to imagine that they have benefited from the experience, too. It is also perhaps worth noting that four of our present sixteen members started with us in this way.

1.5. Hospitation

Hospitation refers to the practice of making the centre's facilities – rooms, documents and equipment – available to researchers who are not members of the centre and who are not the direct responsibility of the centre.

Examples of this practise would be :

- allowing a group of secondary-school teachers working on written texts to consult and photocopy documents in the centre's collection.
- the loan of portable TV equipment to two educational psychologists who wanted to record their consulting sessions.
- booking a room for a group of deaf researchers working on sign language who had no suitable place to meet.

There is no doubt that hospitation can be extremely demanding, especially when facilities are already hard-pressed. But apart from the Centre's responsibility to the Community at large, it is well worth practicing hospitation where possible, because hospitation favours serendipity ; the faculty of happening upon or making fortunate discoveries when not in search of them.

1.6. Didactic research

The growing dissatisfaction with the expression "applied linguistics" which has been mentioned above (p.) has led naturally enough to the search for a more adequate substitute. In France, at least, the leading candidate is "language didactics", though I appreciate that this may not be suitable in a number of other countries where the word "didactic" has long been used in other senses.

When used by scholars like Henri HOLEC or Louis PORCHER, the expression "la didactique des langues étrangères" represents a claim for the independence and specificity of a discipline devoted to language teaching and learning. Research in this context, then, is to be seen not as the application of theories from other disciplines such as psychology, sociology, philosophy or even linguistics, but as the development of a theory (and a body of knowledge) of language teaching and learning.

Obviously, the researcher in language didactics remains free to consult other disciplines as and when necessary, but he or she :

- will not be limited to any one discipline for help and inspiration.
- will translate the concepts and techniques of other disciplines in terms of didactic priorities i.e. will only employ them insofar as they are of didactic interest and will transmute their substances from the "base metals" of sociology, anthropology or whatever into didactic gold.

2. PUBLICATION

"Publication" in this context is taken to mean not just the publishing of articles, reports and books, though that is included, but the making public of research in the widest sense : the diffusion of research and the placing of research results in the public domain.

The importance of this function of a centre will obviously depend on just how much research is carried out, but clearly research which hides its light under a bushel is hardly worthy of the name, not simply because it remains unknown, but because it is not available for scrutiny by the rest of the scientific community. As in all the sciences, only research which is fully accessible, that is, which provides not just results and discussion but also full details of the experimental conditions and observational circumstances, can be described as being in the public domain. Only when such details are available can experiments be criticised and replicated or hypotheses be confirmed or disproved.

It is this aspect of the centre's work which brings to the fore its role in the creation, stocking and distribution of knowledge. If research is regarded as the creation of knowledge, then the form of publication will largely determine the way that knowledge is stocked and represented. But still more important is the choice of social group or public to be addressed, since it will be this choice which determines the social networks into which the knowledge is fed and the discourse variety which is appropriate.

2.1. Reports, Articles, Books

For the reasons which have been mentioned, members of the centre will do their best to communicate with other members of the (scientific) community : knowledge which is not shared cannot be used as a basis for further discussion, it merely becomes either an obstacle or a weapon. The range of types of publication is far too wide to be analysed here, but one particular kind deserves mention : the "in-house magazine". Most, though not all, language centres have their own journal or series of occasional papers (*Les Mélanges Pédagogiques du CRAPEL*, *Jyvässkylän Kielikeskusuitisia*, *Occasional Papers of the CLCS*, Trinity College Dublin, etc.). Apart from their principal role of purveying scientific information these publications (like any other discourse) go a long way towards establishing the centre's social identity and influencing other peoples' perception of it.

2.2. Organisation of scientific meetings

Whether it is a conference, a congress a colloquium or a seminar, the main purpose of a scientific meeting is the exchange of research findings (etc) with other specialists. However, by bringing the scientific community together, such meetings also play an important social role : after all, members of a community are, by definition, people who have something in common. Part of that "something" will be the knowledge negotiated and shared on such occasions. The nature of that knowledge (for example, the status and position attributed to it by the individual, its socio-cognitive "site") will necessarily be influenced by the modalities of acquisition. An interactive discussion, whether a panel session before a plenary audience or a natter in the bar, has repercussions on the ways in which knowledge is perceived, formulated, distributed and acquired.

2.3. Vulgarisation and representation

Vulgarisation, that is, the making known of scientific ideas and findings to the general public, is obviously of the utmost importance on what are, after all, the social sciences. Moreover, not only does the work carried out in language centres concern most members of society, in the end it is them that foot the bill.

Representation is the "stand up and be counted" function : it involves making sure that the discipline's voice is heard on matters which fall within its field of competence. Discussions in the media, public meetings, committee meetings and the activities of associations of various kinds all provide channels for the distribution and maintenance of knowledge. This should not be seen as a policy of militant interventionism, which would probably be counter-productive anyway. Rather, it is a modest but realistic appraisal of the contribution which language studies can make to public education in the widest possible sense. This sense includes things like improving methodology and materials, but it also means creating the conditions necessary for an atmosphere of tolerance and mutual respect.

3. INFORMATION

Much of what has been said above under the heading "publication" obviously applies *mutatis mutandis* to the "information" function. There are, however, two important differences.

- Information is not limited to the centre's own activities but to a greater or lesser extent represents a pooling of the work and activities of other centres and other colleagues.
- Information goes beyond the content of the discipline and into its structures: jobs available, courses being run, etc.

Networking in this context might, therefore, refer to putting teachers in contact with potential employers. But it can also refer to

- Skills exchanges e.g. two learners with different mother tongues help each other to learn one another's languages.
- Informal groupings of people with the same learning objectives.
- Putting researchers in touch with one another, e.g. by passing on visitors from one centre to another or by introducing them to other researchers in the same field.

A further aspect of information in this context is information about what materials are available, and where. This may simply take the form of a pile of publishers, catalogues, but it could be a considerable collection of pedagogic and authentic materials (section 8 in Table 1) together with forms of evaluation tests and questionnaires aimed at helping teachers and learners make informed choices.

4. TRAINING

In those centres which adopt or which are to any extent interested in learner-centered approaches to language learning, the training function will be an important one. It would be wrong to imagine, however, that training will be restricted to learners, since such approaches necessarily entail a shift in the roles of all the participants involved in the learning activities : learners, teachers and helpers, teacher- and helper- trainers and researchers.

4.1. Learner training

By learner training I mean the guided development of the capacity to learn. Learning, seen as an extension of the meanings available to the individual, is a process carried out by learners, not something which is done to them by other people. Most learners, though, need to learn to learn, which means that the centre will try to provide the resources identified in Table 1,7 : self-access systems, self-directed learning programmes, counselling, etc. (Riley, 1985, Dickinson, 198 : Little, 1989).

4.2. Helper training

Knowing how to use those resources is a major part of learner training and the people whose task it is to help learners acquire the necessary skills are often called helpers, to distinguish their roles and aims from those of traditional teaching. Acquiring the necessary skills is not only a matter of work techniques, although they are an essential part : other skills are the ability to identify needs and objectives, to select suitable materials and to plan, organise, evaluate and implement elements in the learning programme. This means that helpers have to share knowledge, rights and decisions with learners which were previously the monopoly of teachers, as well as managing the various resources already the mentioned. Doing so is not easy and goes very much against the grain of academic tradition, which is why the helpers themselves usually need training.

It goes without saying that most centres will continue for the foreseeable future to participate in more traditional teacher-training programmes.

Other factors which will influence the kind of training provided by a centre include :

- the relative emphasis placed on mother-tongue and foreign languages in the centres various activities;
- whether the training is initial or in-service;
- whether the course or programme is intensive or extensive;
- whether the contents of the programmes have specific characteristics : LSP, sociocultural aspects of language use, methodology;
- whether the trainers are members of a special interest group of some kind : the deaf, welders, secondary school teachers, etc.

4.3. Researcher training

One way in which a language centre might contribute to the training of researchers has already been mentioned (p.), namely, by admitting postgraduate students into research groups within the centre working on topics which are relevant to the students' dissertations. Not all centres make preparation for a formal academic qualification obligatory, though. Colleagues from other institutions in the region, or on sabbatical leave from somewhere on the other side of the world, may also be drawn into the centre's activities in a relatively informal way. The logistic problems can sometimes be hair-raising : simply finding mutually convenient dates and times for regular meetings, for example, when each person has their own timetable, can require long and delicate negotiations. But where there's a will, there's a way and language centre staff are usually very positive about the contribution made to their work by "outsiders".

Where research is carried out in groups or teams, it becomes a source of "permanent education" for all concerned, whatever their age or status. In this sense, research is like learning.

Diagramme 1 : PURE RESEARCH

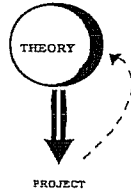


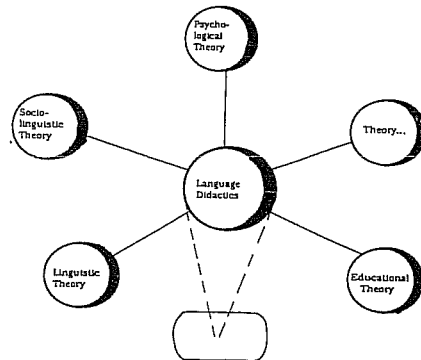
Diagramme 2 : APPLIED RESEARCH



Diagramme 3 : ACTION RESEARCH



Diagramme 4 : DIDACTIC RESEARCH



BASIC ELEMENTS IN A SELF-ACCESS LANGUAGE LEARNING SYSTEM

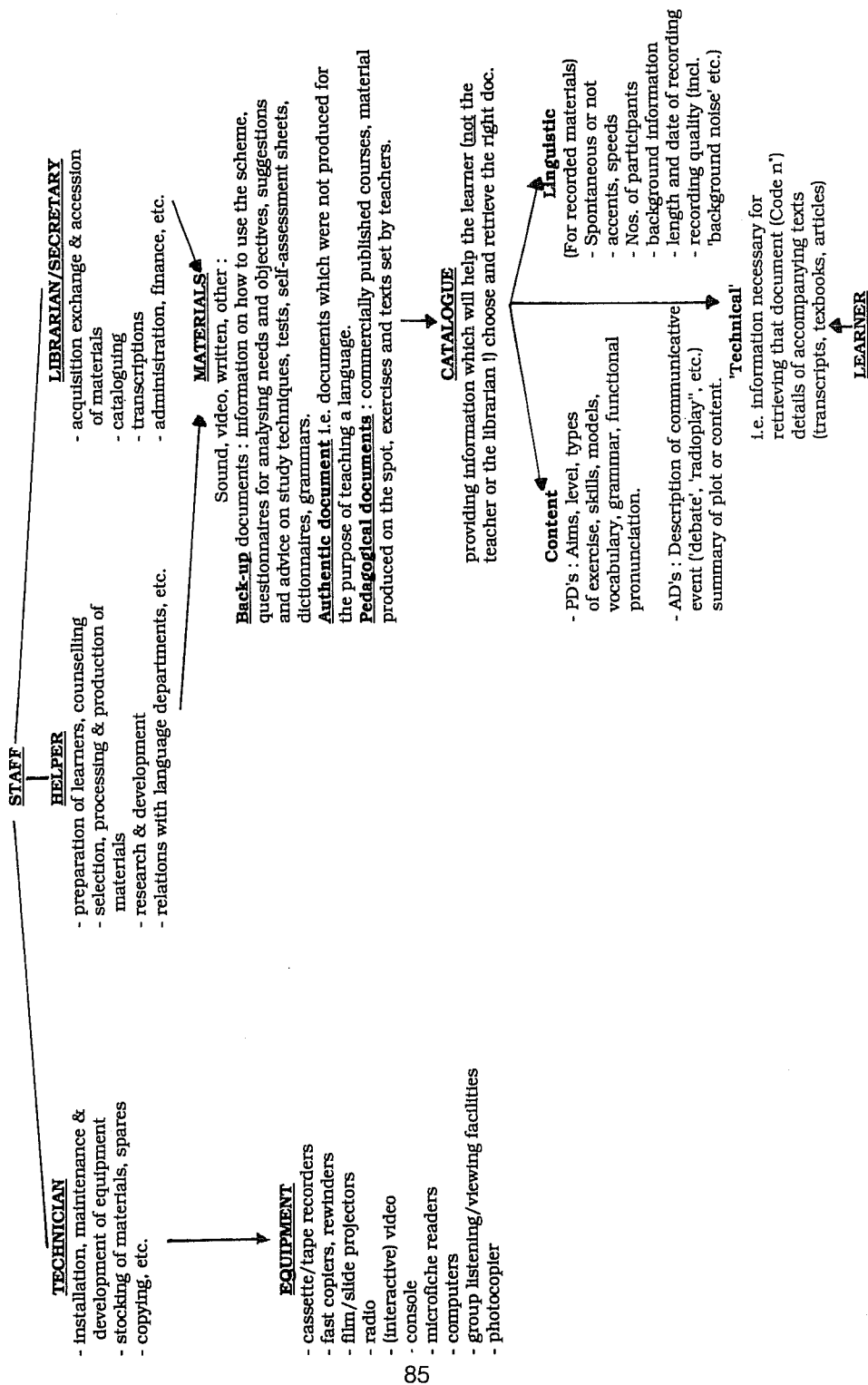
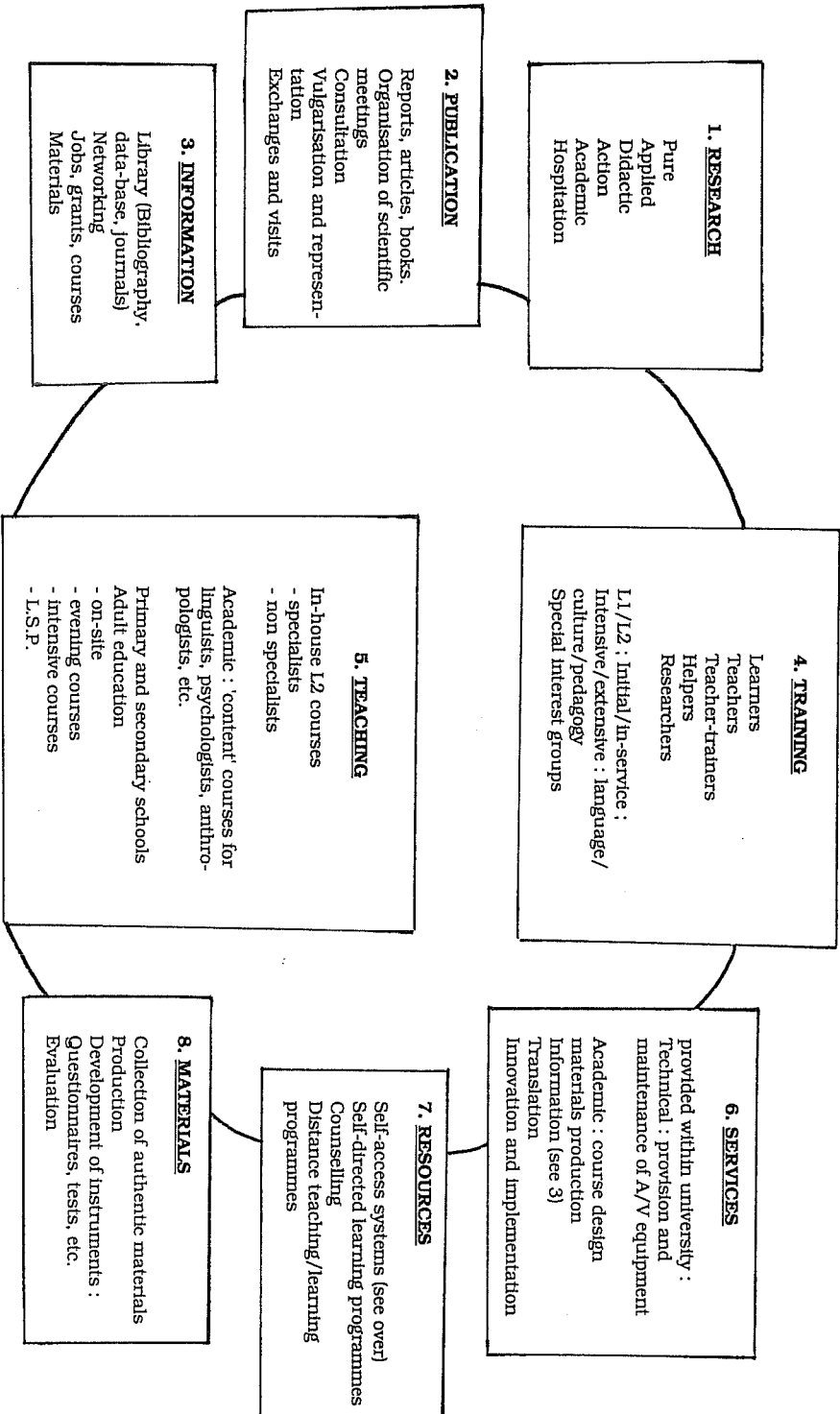


TABLE 1

SOME FUNCTIONS OF UNIVERSITY LANGUAGE CENTRES



CONCLUSION

It has not been possible to go into every topic mentioned in Table I in equal detail, but what I hope to have done is to show that language centres are and should be products of their local situations. This means that they will take on a multiplicity of forms and functions, but if we consider them as essentially mechanisms for the critical study and distribution of knowledge it is still possible to discuss their roles and functions in a consistent and useful way.

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