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Celebrating Languages, Cultures and Global Connections: The Power of Working in Partnership

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Celebrating Languages, Cultures and Global Connections: The Power of Working in Partnership

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Abstract

This paper examines how strategic partnership working can respond creatively to current constraints on language learning in UK (higher) education. Drawing on a case study of the collaboration between the Language Zone, a self-access language learning centre at the University of Leeds, and the 2025 Leeds City of Languages Festival, it explores how community-oriented, civic engagement initiatives can mitigate challenges related to funding pressures, declining language provision, and participation barriers. The paper outlines how the collaboration expanded access to informal language learning, enhanced institutional visibility, and fostered intercultural dialogue and a sense of belonging among students, staff and the wider public. It concludes with a reflection on sustainability and the replicability of this partnership model in comparable contexts.

Keywords: self-access learning, languages, community building, outreach, partnership.

This case study aims to illustrate how strategic partnership working can respond creatively to current constraints on language learning in UK (higher) education. Specifically, it describes the collaboration between the Language Zone, a university-based self-access language learning centre, and the 2025 Leeds City of Languages Festival as a means of addressing challenges related to funding pressures, declining language provision, limited visibility of self-access services, and barriers to participation in language learning beyond the curriculum.

More broadly, the case study aims to contribute to ongoing discussions within self-access language learning (SALL) about how constraints can be reconfigured as opportunities for innovation, collaboration and inclusive practice, offering insights that may be transferable to similar contexts.

The Language Zone at the University of Leeds

The Language Zone at the University of Leeds, UK, is a self-access centre that supports students and staff in developing their language skills through free resources, interactive activities, and peer-to-peer learning. As a dedicated hub for language learners on campus, it provides para-curricular opportunities to practise language skills, connect with the international community, and participate in volunteering roles that build confidence and leadership. Based in a welcoming and central physical space, with an attractive online presence, the Language Zone offers workshops, resources and weekly events designed to enrich the language-learning experience of students with a clear commitment to cultural enrichment and education.

Over the past decade, the Language Zone has evolved from a traditional self-access centre, primarily defined by physical spaces and the provision of print and digital learning resources, into a dynamic language learning hub focused on interaction, participation and community-building (Schneider et al., 2024). It positions learners as active participants in the development of Language Zone programming, rather than as passive users of resources. This shift of identity emphasises active language use through workshops, conversation groups, cultural events, peer learning and collaborative activities. It reflects a move away from a space-centred facility towards a learner-centred service model, where the physical environment supports engagement, creativity and social connection (Gardner, 2022; Toffoli, 2020). The Language Zone is now understood not just as a place to access language learning materials, but as a collaborative learning environment that fosters confidence, wellbeing and authentic language practice within a vibrant, inclusive community.

The Language Zone team facilitates weekly in-person activities to support students' English language development and offer opportunities to become part of a language learning community. In addition, learners can get involved in language exchanges and student-led conversation groups, which are aimed at improving English and other languages, such as French, German, Japanese and Spanish. All these activities are aimed at improving language and conversation skills, while creating a welcoming environment that connects learners with an international community and helps them to build confidence and leadership skills.

In addition to offering a physical space on campus, the Language Zone curates a collection of free online resources and offers some online platforms to enrich the language-learning experience. Plans for future programming include, for example, the potential

revival of synchronous online activities that were popular during the Covid-19 pandemic (Schneider, 2020). These included informal online conversation sessions and more structured options, led by staff and student volunteers. Learners could practise conversational skills, sometimes with guest speakers, while also developing academic skills and confidence.

The Language Zone has experienced ongoing challenges in clearly articulating its identity and strategic relevance at an institutional level, including the impact of its work on individual learners and the wider language learning community.

While many universities currently invest in initiatives that foster student wellbeing and intercultural competence, the Language Zone has recently faced resource pressures relating to staffing and funding, which restrict potential for sustained community-building, up-to-date collections, outreach, and limit opportunities to expand the existing services.

Some of these challenges arise from the difficulty of demonstrating impact through traditional metrics and creating an understanding of the team's specialist roles and how they fit within the administrative structures of Professional Services within the University. The service's informal and flexible mode of engagement is not easily quantifiable, making it difficult to evidence contributions to language development, wellbeing or a sense of belonging. Measuring the experiences and outcomes for learners who range from absolute beginners to multilingual international students is inherently complex. Capturing this diversity in a meaningful way requires adaptable, culturally sensitive approaches and evidence-based models of evaluation.

In response to new and ongoing funding challenges, the Language Zone team has made a conscious effort to position the service more clearly and to make strategic connections more visible. In addition to ongoing user experience research, the team is involved in two projects to evaluate parts of its programming, namely the peer-led Language Groups programme and Say & Play board game sessions.

The team also works with existing and emerging partners to expand its audience and demonstrate impact across the institution. In the past academic year, this has included a series of "Language Zone on the road" workshops delivered in academic departments and student residences, showcasing how the services can be relevant to all students, from those looking to improve their language skills to those who want to meet new friends or make international connections.

Leeds City of Languages – Festival Overview

The Leeds City of Languages Festival constitutes a large-scale public and educational engagement initiative led by the University of Leeds, aimed at promoting multilingualism and fostering inclusive access to language learning. The festival seeks to reframe languages as a shared civic resource *as well as* a specialised academic domain. Guided by the ethos that *languages are for everyone*, the initiative brings together academics, educators, (inter)national partners and community stakeholders in a collaborative programme that foregrounds accessibility, participation and linguistic diversity.

The 2025 edition of the festival took place from 10 to 24 November 2025 across the city of Leeds, with activities hosted on the university campus as well as in schools, libraries and community venues. The initiative was directed by Bettina Hermoso-Gómez and Sofia Martinho, whose leadership within the School of Languages, Cultures and Societies emphasised widening participation and strengthening connections between higher education and the public sphere. The festival was fully funded by the School of Languages, Cultures and Societies at the University of Leeds, enabling most activities to be offered free of charge and thereby addressing financial constraints that are frequently identified as one of the barriers to participation in language learning (Reinders & Benson, 2017).

The programme reflected a deliberately broad conceptualisation of language learning, encompassing both formal and informal modes, and engaging diverse audiences, including early-years participants, school pupils and adult learners. Activities included language taster sessions, hands-on workshops, public lectures, performances, film screenings, exhibitions and interactive family-oriented events.

Language taster sessions were a key element of the programme, delivered by members of staff, student volunteers and international partners such as Instituto Cervantes and Alliance Française. Complementary workshops integrated linguistic and cultural dimensions, for example through activities such as a Korean dance workshop. These embodied practices can be interpreted as facilitating multimodal engagement with language, thereby expanding the notion of what constitutes language learning.

The inclusion of public talks and panel discussions further positioned the festival as a site of knowledge exchange between academia and the wider public. Researchers presented work on themes such as multilingualism, artificial intelligence and large language models, intercultural

communication, and language and identity. In doing so, the festival contributed to the democratisation of disciplinary knowledge and aligned with recent calls to situate language learning within broader sociocultural and political contexts (Pennycook, 2021).

Cultural events constituted another key dimension of the festival, with performances, storytelling and film screenings highlighting the aesthetic and affective dimensions of language. These activities created spaces for experiential and participatory engagement, supporting intergenerational learning and reinforcing the social nature of language use.

Collaboration was central to the festival's design and delivery. The initiative involved over 90 contributors and 42 partner organisations across educational, cultural and community sectors, including schools, community language groups and (inter)national cultural institutions. This networked model enabled the co-creation of events that reflected the linguistic and cultural diversity of the city while extending the reach of the festival beyond the university. From a SALL perspective, such partnerships can be seen as expanding the affordances available to learners, creating a distributed learning environment that supports autonomy through access to diverse resources and communities (Murray, 2017).

The scale of the 2025 festival further highlights its potential value as a self-access-oriented initiative. A total of 117 activities were delivered, representing 31 languages and attracting over 10,000 attendees, both in person and online. Notably, more than 600 participants engaged directly in trying a new language, suggesting that the festival successfully lowered entry barriers and stimulated initial engagement with language learning. While rooted in the local context, the festival also achieved national visibility, demonstrating the potential of place-based initiatives to contribute to wider discourses on multilingualism and access.

In summary, the Leeds City of Languages Festival can be conceptualised as a large-scale, community-oriented environment that extends beyond traditional institutional boundaries. By integrating academic expertise, community collaboration and inclusive design, it addressed multiple constraints on language learning, including access, cost and perceptions of relevance. Its guiding principle - *languages are for everyone* - was operationalised through a participatory and flexible programme that supported learner autonomy in diverse and socially embedded ways. As such, the festival offers a valuable model for advancing more equitable and inclusive approaches to language learning and advocacy.

Collaboration Between the Language Zone and the 2025 Leeds City of Languages Festival

Aims of the Collaboration

The collaboration between the 2025 Leeds City of Languages Festival and the Language Zone was conceived as a dynamic platform for fostering linguistic diversity, cultural awareness, and inclusive learning across both the University and the wider community through meaningful engagement with languages and cultures. At its core, the partnership aimed to celebrate the rich tapestry of languages and cultures present in the region, creating inclusive spaces where participants could explore, share and experience different cultural perspectives and encourage mutual respect and curiosity.

This initiative demonstrated a strong, shared commitment to cultural enrichment and education that benefits both the University and the wider city. By positioning the collaboration as both academically relevant and socially engaging, the Leeds City of Languages Festival and the Language Zone reinforce the University's role as a hub for intercultural dialogue and community connection.

Alongside the festival's aim to celebrate and raise awareness around linguistic and cultural diversity across the city, a key objective was to enhance the visibility of the Language Zone as a vibrant centre for informal language learning and community engagement. Through a coordinated programme of staff- and student-led activities, the partnership empowered participants to take an active role in shaping and delivering initiatives, fostering a sense of ownership and collaboration.

The collaboration also aimed to strengthen the Language Zone's role in promoting global citizenship and intercultural understanding, underlining more key objectives of the festival. By encouraging dialogue and participation across cultural boundaries, the programme supported the development of intercultural competence, adaptability, and openness among students and staff, strengthening the University's civic role and reinforcing its identity as a globally engaged institution that values diversity and inclusion.

In parallel, a coordinated social media collaboration played a crucial role in amplifying the reach of the partnership. By promoting events, sharing participant experiences, and highlighting available resources, the digital strategy of the partnership increased engagement and ensured that the wider University community was aware of and able to benefit from the programme.

Finally, the partnership sought to raise awareness of the wide range of support services and activities organised by the Language Zone and available to the University community. By better promoting these opportunities, Leeds City of Languages and the Language Zone can encourage greater participation, improve student experience, and ensure that learners feel supported in their academic and personal development, aiming to cultivate a more connected, culturally aware and globally minded University community.

Programme

The collaboration between the Language Zone and Leeds City of Languages resulted in a diverse programme of activities designed to promote multilingualism, intercultural exchange and informal language learning. The programme of activities was co-created by the festival directors and the Language Zone Manager, ensuring that the collaboration reflected both the civic engagement aims of the festival and the learner-centred ethos of the Language Zone. One of the key aims of the partnership for the Language Zone was to increase its visibility within the University community and attract potential new users. To support this objective, the programme was designed to appeal to a broad range of participants, including academic and professional services staff, experienced linguists, individuals with little or no prior language-learning experience, international students and members of the wider public. This emphasis on accessibility and inclusivity was particularly important in the context of self-access language learning, where participation is often voluntary and shaped by learners' confidence, sense of belonging and awareness of available opportunities. Although the activities delivered through the Language Zone were primarily aimed at University of Leeds students and staff, several workshops and events were also open to external audiences. In this way, the programme not only strengthened engagement within the University community but also contributed to the festival's wider civic and outreach objectives, while positioning the Language Zone as a dynamic and socially engaged learning environment.

The events of the festival hosted and co-created by the Language Zone focused particularly on accessible, low-threshold activities that encouraged participants to explore new languages and cultures in a relaxed and welcoming environment. A central feature of the collaboration was the delivery of language taster sessions representing a wide range of linguistic and cultural traditions. These included, for example, Arabic, Catalan, Czech, Greek, Italian,

Kurdish, Portuguese, Quechua, Slovene, Spanish, Thai, Turkish and Ukrainian. The diversity of languages offered was particularly significant, as it combined commonly taught languages with less widely taught and community languages. The inclusion of languages such as Quechua, Kurdish and Slovene also reflected an effort to challenge dominant hierarchies within language education and create space for languages that are less commonly represented within formal university curricula, reinforcing the festival's commitment to linguistic inclusivity and cultural representation.

By offering short and informal introductions to languages, these sessions created low-pressure opportunities for participation and experimentation, particularly for learners who may not otherwise engage with language learning in formal educational settings. For some participants, the taster sessions functioned as a first point of contact with the Language Zone itself, helping to raise awareness of its broader provision of language exchanges, conversation groups and independent learning support.

In addition to language tasters, the programme included language exchange sessions, conversation cafés, a literary treasure hunt, workshops and cultural activities designed to foster interaction and community-building. Workshops such as Chinese calligraphy, Portuguese tile-making and Japanese origami integrated language learning with creative and embodied cultural practices. These activities reflected the Language Zone's learner-centred ethos by prioritising participation, interaction and enjoyment over formal instruction, while also encouraging intercultural dialogue and peer learning between participants from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds.

Feedback and Reflection

Participants

The written feedback gathered from participants at the end of each session highlights the overwhelmingly positive reception of the programme, particularly in relation to both the range and quality of activities offered. A recurring theme across responses is the highly interactive nature of the sessions, which participants clearly valued. As one Italian taster attendee noted, “we got to practice immediately after learning new content,” emphasising the importance of embedding practical application within the learning experience. This sentiment was echoed by another participant who reflected, “The session was interactive, I enjoyed it a lot. Exploring new

languages and culture(s) always helps (us) to grow,” pointing to the broader developmental impact of such engagement.

Participants also consistently described the sessions as enjoyable and engaging. For instance, a Chinese Calligraphy taster attendee commented, “So fun, really engaging and lots of opportunities to practice the different sections”, reinforcing the effectiveness of combining creativity with structured learning. This balance appears to have contributed significantly to participant satisfaction, ensuring that sessions were both educational and accessible.

The cultural dimension of the programme was particularly well received. One Kurdish taster attendee shared, “I loved every part of the session, especially when the leader spoke about her favourite parts of Kurdish culture”, highlighting the value of personal insights and authentic cultural exchange. These moments of lived experience enriched the sessions, allowing participants to connect more deeply with the subject matter beyond language alone.

Another key strength reflected in the feedback was the opportunity to try new and otherwise inaccessible activities. One participant noted the value of “learning a new skill [...] don’t get the opportunity to try out such things”, suggesting that the programme successfully broadened participants’ horizons and introduced them to experiences outside their usual academic or social contexts.

Finally, the quality of resources and delivery was also recognised. An Arabic taster attendee remarked, “General cultural knowledge as well as language! Handout: very useful!!”, demonstrating appreciation not only for the content but also for the supporting materials that enhanced learning beyond the session itself.

Taken together, these responses demonstrate that the programme has been highly effective in delivering diverse, high-quality, and engaging activities. The consistent emphasis on interactivity, cultural richness, and accessibility suggests that the collaboration between Leeds City of Languages and the Language Zone was successful in fostering a stimulating and inclusive environment for language learning and intercultural exchange.

Organisers

Coordinating such a large-scale initiative with a small team is complex, time consuming and demanding. Developing partnerships was key to the success of Leeds City of Languages which benefited greatly from the knowledge and expertise of partners, allowing the organisers to reach out to new audiences.

The collaboration between Leeds City of Languages and the Language Zone proved highly successful, resulting in the delivery of a substantial number of engaging and well-attended activities across the duration of the festival. Through joint planning and coordination, this partnership facilitated a tailored strand of the overall programme, specifically designed for the academic community, that promoted intercultural dialogue, multilingual engagement and community participation, on campus.

The organisers benefited significantly from the local knowledge and expertise of the Language Zone Manager, who has extensive experience in developing and delivering activities for this particular audience. This ensured that events were appropriately pitched, relevant and aligned with the expectations of students and staff. As a result, responsibility for on-campus provision was shared, with the Language Zone taking a leading role in its coordination, allowing the core festival team to focus more effectively on engaging wider audiences beyond the University. This collaborative approach not only enhanced the overall quality and coherence of the programme but also contributed to a more efficient and strategic use of limited resources.

For the Language Zone, the collaboration significantly enhanced its visibility within the wider institutional context, showcasing the breadth of its educational and cultural contributions to students, staff and external stakeholders. The festival also provided an effective platform for signposting the Language Zone's ongoing initiatives and opportunities to alumni present on campus and the wider community, thereby strengthening connections between graduates and the institution. By hosting the opening ceremony, for example, to which senior leaders were invited, the Language Zone team had the chance to showcase its services.

The involvement of the University's Language Zone further strengthened the festival's alignment with accessibility principles. In its day-to-day business, as a dedicated space for independent language study, the Language Zone supports learners in developing autonomy and confidence. Its contribution to the festival also introduced participants to strategies for continuing language learning beyond the event itself. In this sense, the festival functioned not only as a one-off engagement opportunity but also as a gateway to sustained, self-directed learning. The partnership also aligns closely with institutional priorities around internationalisation, wellbeing, and informal learning, therefore reinforcing the Language Zone's role in student experience, outreach, and community engagement. As a result of the festival, the Language Zone team has been able to make useful connections and increase its network.

Together with partners and volunteers, the team has already delivered two more series of language taster sessions, as a “Love Languages” series in February 2026 and as part of the *World Unite Festival* overseen by Leeds University Union in March 2026. The team is planning a range of conversation club-style sessions led by volunteers, which are taking place as a direct result of connections forged during the festival. These sessions could easily be replicated by similar services, as the main drivers are volunteers keen to share their languages and cultures. However, the reliance on volunteers’ passion, enthusiasm and consistent input raises questions around service sustainability. This will need to be considered for future developments both around the festival and similar volunteer-led initiatives, especially in light of ongoing funding challenges to para-curricular activities.

Overall, the partnership demonstrated how working collaboratively can be the answer to some of the challenges that UK language education faces. By positioning the Language Zone within a high-profile university-wide and city-wide initiative, the collaboration also created opportunities to showcase the role of the Language Zone as a dynamic and socially engaged learning environment rather than solely a resource-based service.

There is a current and ongoing UK narrative around the devaluation of language learning. Taken together with the financial challenges that British universities currently face and the recent cuts of language provision in all levels of education, it may be assumed that the general public is not interested in language learning. This initiative shows that is not the case when a different approach is taken. Observations and feedback suggest that this model of partnership is successful and offers a replicable model to other higher education institutions that are looking at showing the added value of language departments, as a way to fight closures of language provision.

Future Directions

This collaboration has now become an integral component of both the festival programme and the Language Zone’s wider engagement strategy, given the demonstrable success of the 2025 initiative. High levels of participation, engagement, and positive feedback evidenced its effectiveness in promoting multilingualism, intercultural dialogue, and informal language learning across university and community contexts, while also enhancing the visibility and uptake of the Language Zone’s provision.

Building on this success, future developments will focus on expanding and diversifying the programme of activities. In particular, the collaboration aims to maintain a wide range of

languages within the taster session programme in order to continue fostering linguistic inclusivity and intercultural exchange. The organisers are especially committed to preserving a balance between commonly taught languages and less widely taught or home, heritage and community languages, which was identified as one of the distinctive strengths of the 2025 programme. This approach reflects a broader commitment to challenging traditional hierarchies within language education and creating opportunities for participants to engage with a wider spectrum of linguistic and cultural experiences.

In addition, the 2026 partnership aims to expand the number of culturally related workshops offered as part of the programme, following the particularly strong response to these activities in 2025. Workshops such as Portuguese tile-making and Chinese calligraphy were fully booked, highlighting the high level of interest in creative and embodied forms of intercultural engagement. Future editions of the festival will therefore seek to further integrate language learning with cultural, artistic and community-based activities to create more holistic and inclusive forms of participation.

More broadly, the continuation of the partnership demonstrates the potential of collaborations between self-access language learning centres and civic cultural initiatives to generate sustainable forms of engagement that extend beyond formal classroom settings. The ongoing development of the partnership will provide further opportunities to strengthen connections between the University and the wider community while reinforcing the role of languages as tools for communication, cultural understanding and social cohesion.

Conclusion

This paper has explored the collaboration between the Language Zone at the University of Leeds and the 2025 Leeds City of Languages Festival as a case study of how partnerships between self-access language learning centres and civic cultural initiatives can respond creatively to some of the constraints currently affecting language teaching and learning in UK higher education. The collaboration demonstrated how a shared commitment to multilingualism, accessibility and community engagement can generate innovative and inclusive forms of participation that extend beyond formal classroom settings and traditional institutional boundaries.

The partnership proved highly successful in promoting informal language learning, intercultural dialogue and public engagement with languages and cultures. Through a diverse

programme of language tasters and cultural workshops, the collaboration created low-threshold opportunities for participation that encouraged learners from different backgrounds and levels of experience to engage with languages in meaningful and socially situated ways. The positive participant feedback and high levels of attendance across the programme further highlighted the value of creating welcoming and accessible spaces for language learning and intercultural exchange.

Importantly, the collaboration also contributed to raising awareness of the Language Zone across the University and to attracting new users to its wider provision of self-access language learning opportunities. By positioning the Language Zone within a high-profile city-wide initiative, the partnership strengthened its institutional visibility and reinforced its role as a dynamic and socially engaged learning environment rather than solely a resource-based service. This is particularly significant at a time when self-access centres and Modern Languages departments across the UK are increasingly required to demonstrate impact and relevance within contexts shaped by financial pressures, curriculum changes and declining language uptake.

The success of the partnership has already led to plans for its continuation and expansion within the 2026 edition of the festival. In addition, the connections established through the collaboration have enabled the Language Zone team to develop further initiatives beyond the festival itself. These developments demonstrate the potential for such collaborations to generate sustained engagement and create new learning communities beyond the timeframe of a single event.

At the same time, the case study raises important questions around sustainability. Many of the activities developed through the collaboration rely heavily on volunteers' enthusiasm, commitment and willingness to share their languages and cultures. While this community-driven model creates authentic and participatory learning opportunities, it also highlights the challenges of maintaining long-term initiatives in contexts of ongoing funding pressures and limited institutional resources for para-curricular activities. The sustainability of volunteer-led programming therefore remains an important consideration for future developments both within this partnership and in comparable initiatives elsewhere.

Nevertheless, the collaboration offers a valuable and potentially replicable model for other self-access centres, universities and language learning communities seeking to respond creatively to the constraints currently affecting the higher education sector. The partnership

demonstrates that impactful and inclusive language learning initiatives do not necessarily require large-scale resources, but rather strategic collaboration, community engagement and the creation of accessible spaces for participation. In particular, the integration of civic partnerships, volunteer participation and culturally embedded activities provides one possible framework for extending the reach and relevance of language learning beyond academic programmes alone.

More broadly, the continuation of the partnership demonstrates the potential of collaborations between self-access language learning centres and civic cultural initiatives to generate sustainable forms of engagement that strengthen relationships between universities and their wider communities. The festival further illustrates how languages can function not only as academic subjects but also as tools for communication, cultural understanding and social cohesion. In this sense, the collaboration between the Language Zone and Leeds City of Languages offers an important example of how constraints within higher education can be reconfigured into opportunities for innovation, partnership-working and community-building within contemporary language learning environments.

Declaration

Generative AI tools have been used for non-substantive writing support such as grammar and spelling corrections.

Notes on the Contributors

Sofia Martinho is an Associate Professor of Portuguese at the University of Leeds and Director of the Camões Centre for Portuguese Language. Sofia's scholarship focuses on the areas of language pedagogy and digital approaches to language learning and teaching, with a particular focus on developing fluency and internationalisation through COIL (Collaborative Online International Learning) projects. She frequently leads educational engagement and policy-related activities.

Bettina Hermoso-Gómez is an Associate Professor in Spanish at the University of Leeds and Director of Routes into Languages in Yorkshire and Humberside. She has published several textbooks and supporting materials for teaching Spanish, French and German in primary and secondary education. She is the co-founder of the journal *The Language Scholar* and a member of the Centre for Excellence in Language Teaching.

Carolyn Schneider is a chartered librarian who manages the self-access centre, the Language Zone, at the University of Leeds. She has worked in academic and public libraries and has a keen interest in how information professionals can help people achieve what they need and want. Her other research interests include community building and independent language learning.

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