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The Role of English for Specific Purposes (ESP) in Supporting the Linguistic Dimension in English-medium Instruction (EMI)¹



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Partly because of the Bologna Declaration, the so-called English-Medium Instruction (EMI) courses in universities have undergone a strong surge in the last 15 years. This initial phase of growth in EMI has had an impact on LSP/ESP (Language/English for Specific Purposes) courses, which have in some cases suffered a consequent decline. This article seeks to highlight the potential of ESP to prepare students in EMI communication, support academic disciplinary skills, develop transversal skills, and foster intercultural communication. The study analyses an ESP-focused curricular design that aims to help students develop English-language communicative effectiveness for a domain-specific context: social and human services. The various integrative practices inherent in ESP instruction call attention to its potential as a harmonizing and empowering force for content- and language-integrated learning when used alongside EMI.

KEYWORDS:

English-Medium Instruction (EMI); Language for Specific Purposes (LSP), English for Specific Purposes (ESP), Content-and-language integrated learning (CLIL), Integrating content and language in higher education (ICLHE).

En parte debido a la Declaración de Bolonia, los llamados cursos de Docencia Universitaria en Inglés (DUI) han experimentado un fuerte auge en los últimos 15 años. Esta fase inicial de crecimiento de la DUI ha tenido un impacto en los cursos de Lengua para Fines Específicos (LFE), que en algunos casos han sufrido una disminución consecuente. Este artículo busca destacar el potencial de Inglés para Fines Específicos (IFE) para preparar a los estudiantes en la comunicación EMI, apoyar las habilidades académicas disciplinarias, desarrollar habilidades transversales y fomentar la comunicación intercultural. El estudio analiza un diseño curricular centrado en IFE que tiene como objetivo ayudar a los estudiantes a desarrollar la eficacia comunicativa en inglés para un contexto de dominio específico: los servicios sociales y humanos. Las diversas prácticas de integración inherentes a la enseñanza de IFE ponen de relieve su potencial como fuerza armonizadora y fortalecedora del aprendizaje integrado de contenidos e idiomas cuando se utiliza junto con la DUA.

PALABRAS CLAVE:

Docencia Universitaria en Inglés (DUI), Lengua para Fines Específicos (LFE), Inglés para Fines Específicos (IFE), Aprendizaje Integrado de Contenidos y Lenguas Extranjeras (AICLE), Integreción de Contenido y Lengua en la Educación Superior (ICLES).

Introduction: A *Conditio Sine Qua Non*, but one that is last in line

Since the Bologna Declaration (1999), European academic institutions have initiated a harmonisation process in line with the increased internationalisation of university education. As part of this process, English-medium instruction courses at university level have undergone a sharp surge in the last 15 years (Dimova et al., 2015; Lasagabaster & Doiz, 2021; Macaro et al., 2018; Maiworm & Wächter, 2014). Following an initial phase of exponential growth, this use of English to teach disciplinary courses has partly contributed to a decline in ESP courses (Arnò-Maciá & Aguilar, 2018; Fortanet-Gómez & Räisänen, 2008; Lasagabaster, 2018; Lasagabaster & Doiz, 2021) with universities asking for international certifications in order to test English language competences: “English teaching is being increasingly moved out of university departments [...] with (international) certifications often replacing university courses and examinations to assess the achievement of the required standards in English” (Pavesi & Ghia, 2020, p.22).

Paradoxically, on the one hand, the internationalisation process serves as a driver of greater English use, while on the other hand it has led to a new vision of ESP courses as an ‘ancillary’ concept linked to the ‘fragility’ highlighted by Swales et al. (2001). This view is also linked to Hyland’s (2012) claims about status within English taught programmes: that English for Academic Purposes (EAP)/English for Specific Purposes (ESP) lecturers worked ‘for’ (see also Raimes, 1991 for the butler’s stance concept) rather than ‘with’ content lecturers. Dearden (2018) goes even further by observing that there is a sort of hierarchy at the university level whereby some subjects are perceived as more important than others: “In some institutions there is a traditional and rather unhelpful hierarchy in place in which academics are considered ‘superior’ to English Language teachers and this makes it difficult for EMI lecturers to ask for and accept support from language teachers and vice versa” (p. 330).

In some contexts, the institutions might decide that, since English would be used as a specialised means of communication in EMI courses, there would no longer be a need for ESP courses, which by definition focus on the language (Dearden, 2018). Therefore, while on the one hand English is seen as a *conditio sine qua non*, on the other it can become, in some contexts, almost invisible when viewed as a teaching subject, as Pavesi & Ghia (2020) also note:

No matter how vital English has become in the contemporary world, proficiency in this language risks being taken for granted [...] It is as if the world status of English by magic also implied learner-users’ mastery of the L2 [...]. While university governances stress the importance of internationalisation, they often do not see the need to specifically cater for the teaching of the language. Knowledge of English is viewed as a basic pre-requisite, rather than a complex

and disciplinary-specific competence to be developed at university level, as revealed by the growing trend in Italian universities to downgrade the teaching of English. (p. 22)

In fact, while EMI teachers have partly shown a lack of interest in the language as a teaching/learning vehicle (Dearden, 2018), or claimed that, as disciplinary specialists, language is not their purview (see Airey, 2012; Dafouz et al., 2014), at the same time they feel a need to be up to par linguistically and communicatively competent in front of their students (Costa, 2016; O’Dwyer & Atli, 2018). In contrast, when taking into consideration studies that have explored students’ perceptions in the Italian context, which is the focus of the present study, it is shown that students are generally happy with the experience overall and have expressed a need for language focus and linguistic support (Costa & Mariotti, 2017; Doiz et al., 2019; Mastellotto & Zanin, 2021; Polli, 2021). Few studies in the literature have dealt with the topic of ESP as a way of supporting EMI courses in the Italian context (Leonardi, 2015; Prior, 2021) and will be referred to in the following theoretical section of the paper.

Exploring solutions for this partly linguistic gap in EMI, the present article highlights the potential of Language for Specific Purposes (LSP) and in particular ESP to prepare students in EMI communication, helping them develop academic disciplinary skills and transversal skills, and promote intercultural communication as also suggested by the Erasmus+ TAEC project (2017-2020) and McKinley & Rose (2022).

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EMI and ESP

This section focuses on the differences between the constructs of EMI and ESP, highlighting how they can be integrated and considered as complementary (Wilkinson, 2008; Bowles & Murphy, 2020). It also underlines that the choice to maintain both EMI and ESP courses in higher education institutions could be considered a positive development (Dafouz, 2021; Galloway & Rose, 2021; Galloway & Ruegg, 2020; Kırkgöz & Dikilitaş, 2018; Schmidt-Unterberger, 2018).

The term EMI is used in this article, although some scholars refer to the same concept by using the acronym ICLHE or CLIL at the tertiary level (see Pecorari, 2020; Richards & Pun, 2002 for an overview of the terminology), even in contexts in which there is no sign of integration (Macaro et al., 2018). The term is used here from a European perspective to refer to whole programmes as well as single courses taught in English at university level. As a result, some of the studies referred to below might use all these terms in an interchangeable way.

Greere & Räsänen (2008), and subsequently Airey (2016), investigated the various facets of these different approaches. Airey talks about a language-content continuum in terms of learning outcomes, with the two extremes being EAP (only language) and EMI (only content). Dafouz (2021) in a theoretical and comprehensive article describes common points between EMI and ESP and calls for building bridges between the two constructs and avoiding a ‘binary’ opposition. The article is constructed around the ideas of ‘convergence’ and ‘divergence’ calling for future directions mainly related to developing a disciplinary literacies-based curriculum, considering translanguaging and multilingualism as important, implementing interdisciplinary PD (professional development).

EMI is defined as “The use of the English language to teach academic subjects in countries or jurisdictions where the first language (L1) of the majority of the population is not English” (Dearden, 2014, p.4). The main characteristics of EMI in general (each class session could then include one or more of these traits) are as follows: first, the subject-matter is the main learning and teaching objective; second, content is the focus of the assessment; third, the teacher is the subject-matter expert (Dafouz, 2021; Pecorari, 2020; Richards & Pun, 2022).

As highlighted in the introduction, EMI represents one of the ways in which universities develop their internationalisation profiles, and it provides less expensive qualifications in some non-English-speaking countries compared to some English-speaking ones. According to Rose et al. (2020), EMI’s popularity rests, in part, on the view of English as a prestige language in higher education, one which can enhance students’ career prospects through improved language proficiency and an international mindset. They claim: “A widely purported benefit of EMI is that it kills two birds with one stone; in other words, students simultaneously acquire both English and content knowledge” (Rose et al., 2020, p. 2150).

In Italy, the development of EMI has, in part, been promoted through the Gelmini Law (240/2010), which calls for “increased mobility of teachers and students, more cooperation among universities regarding study and research, and the initiation of teaching or study programs in a foreign language”, the latter of which is often English. As shown by Cicillini (2021), EMI in Italy is far from being a homogenous phenomenon and local practices tend to be quite variable across regions and even across institutions within a region.

LSP, a term in use since the 1960’s, refers to the language used for specific uses. When referring to English, it is called ESP. Like EMI, there are many terms and branches that derive from ESP. For example, English for Science and Technology (EST) and English for Business and Economics (EBE). In turn, these are divided into English for Academic Purposes (EAP) and English for Occupational Purposes (EOP). The provision of ESP at university level has grown over the years to the point that Räsänen and Fortanet-Gómez (2008) say that “we would not be exaggerating when we say that most of the English taught at universities in Europe today is English for Specific Purposes (ESP)” (p. 12). According to the same authors (2008):

The main distinction of ESP is that the English taught caters for the needs of learners in specific disciplines other than the arts and languages. ESP teaching uses the methodologies and activities of the various disciplines it is designed to serve, and it focuses on the language, lexis, grammar, discourses and genres, of those disciplines rather than using the general grammar, learners’ dictionaries and general public genres and discourses. These absolute characteristics are broad and distinguish ESP from general English courses in that ESP students are already assumed to possess some general *knowledge* of English. The purpose of learning the language is to communicate within a specific academic, occupational or professional domain. (p. 12)

The main features of ESP-type of experiences if compared with EMI are the following: first, the language is the main learning and teaching objective; second, the language is the focus of the assessment; third, the teacher is the language expert (Dafouz, 2021; Richards & Pun, 2022, see Table 1 below).

Table 1
Differences between EMI and ESP

Type of course	Teaching and learning objective	Focus of the assessment	Background of the professor
EMI	Subject-matter	Content	Content specialist
ESP	Linguistic Competence	Language	Language specialist

EMI and ESP also have some points in common, but above all they have been influenced by each other. For example, Yang (2016), in a study on CLIL at the tertiary level, analysed 31 CLIL and ESP courses at a university in Taiwan through teacher interviews, noting that CLIL courses were more focused on content alone while ESP dealt with both content and language, and thus in some way came closer to the conceptualisation of a CLIL approach. Arnó-Macià & Mancho-Barés (2015) carried out a study in Spain that analysed documents, considered the views of students and teachers, and involved classroom observation (here, too, the term CLIL was used). They concluded that more collaboration between teachers would be beneficial. González Ardeo (2016) investigated 132 Engineering students involved in EMI courses and attending a non-compulsory ESP course in Bilbao by means of a questionnaire. Students showed a very positive attitude towards both constructs EMI and ESP, which was also probably due to the non-compulsory nature of the courses. Martín del Pozo (2017) in a paper on CLIL, EMI and their relationship with ESP focusing on listening comprehension as a core issue and a suggested training topic for EMI lecturers. Recently, Arnó-Macià, Aguilar-Pérez & Tatzl (2020) investigated students' views on ESP and whether ESP helped them in EMI courses, and found that students did consider ESP course as helpful.

A study comparable to the present one was conducted at the same trilingual Italian university by Prior (2021), who worked on restructuring a syllabus design for English for Specific Academic Purposes (ESAP) in the Faculty of Economics and Management based on a needs analysis that emerged from the student questionnaire and interviews with the lecturers. The new syllabus focuses more on productive skills in both speaking and writing. Curriculum planning is also seen as crucial according to a theoretical article by O'Dwyer & Atlı (2018) on EMI students' and lecturers' needs in Turkish universities: "ESP/EAP is also about incorporating broader academic skills so that language programs contribute to academic development not defined uniquely in terms of language, such as study skills, time management, organised planning, or approaches to effective learning" (p. 297).

The above-stated studies all point to experiences in which ESP and EMI are seen as complementing each other. This vision is in concert with the experiences of "adjunct teaching" (Brinton et al., 1989), which has existed for many years in multicultural contexts, such as that of the United States, where parallel and shared ESP courses are carried out together with disciplinary courses (for encouraging results of adjunct teaching in EMI, see Roquet et al., 2020), thereby possibly creating an environment in which both disciplines support one another (Arnó-Macià et al., 2020; Arnó-Macià & Mancho-Barés, 2015; Dearden, 2018; Leonardi, 2015; Macaro, 2018; Sobhy et al., 2013). Roquet et al. (2020) clarify that "[...] adjunct instruction refers to a language course taught by a language specialist in parallel with a content class, and which addresses content topics and associated language knowledge and skills necessary to follow the content instruction successfully" (p. 3).

This synergy could also lead to a collaboration between language teachers and content teachers that would break down the still-existing barriers between academic disciplines, a path that is certainly not without obstacles, as Airey (2016) notes:

If collaboration is to function effectively, both parties need to understand what the other can bring to the table. It is important that both content and language experts do not underestimate the difficulties of crossing disciplinary boundaries in this way. On the one hand, the content lecturer may initially view the language expert as a low-level technician dealing with issues of secondary importance who has been brought in to offer a 'quick language fix'. On the other hand, it is easy for the language expert to fall into the trap of criticizing what may appear to be undeveloped or naïve approaches to disciplinary discourse on the part of the content lecturer. (p. 78)

Therefore, the role of ESP is not only to support students but also teachers in the form of professional development courses that offer training on teaching and learning strategies and enhance teacher cognition (Borg, 2003), or at least already existing PD programmes could have a session dealing with this topic.

Taking into consideration that the linguistic and communicative needs that both lecturers and students need in EMI can vary across different contexts (Richards & Pun, 2022) a list of topics is provided that could help the synergy between non-linguistic disciplinary specialists and language specialists: presentation skills, intonation, pronunciation, prosody, fluency (all related to a specific discipline), disciplinary lexical accuracy, use of questions, use of examples, giving feedback to students, helping students with notetaking, preparing exams, materials design, intercultural skills, signposting, and classroom language (see Morell, 2020). Students, on the other hand, could be supported in asking for lecture notes, proofreading for errors in written work, preparing reading guides/notes, revising drafts of take-home paper assignments, participating in class discussions, developing time management techniques, disciplinary vocabulary development skills, and giving oral presentations (see Dearden, 2018, and Prior, 2021). These topics are to be considered as suggestions and can be applied in part or in whole to different contexts according to specific needs.

“This synergy could also lead to a collaboration between language teachers and content teachers that would break down the still-existing barriers between academic disciplines.”

Methodology and Research Procedures

The methodology of this small-scale study is mainly qualitative based on “a case study design [...] employed to gain an in-depth understanding of the situation and meaning for those involved. The interest is in the process rather than outcomes, in context rather than specific variable, in discovery rather than confirmation” (Merriam, 1998, p.19). In particular, the methodology can be defined as a descriptive case study (Yin, 2018) and is based on different sources of data (Gillham, 2000) related to the curricular design of the course being considered.

As regards the authors’ position vis-à-vis the present research, one is to be considered an outsider, not involved in the course programme being analysed, and the other as an insider involved directly in the programme design and implementation. This dual perspective of ‘insider-outsider’ stance Hellowell (2006) and of ‘emic-etic’ analysis (Silverman, 2005) are considered as heuristic devices to develop reflexivity in qualitative research.

Context of the Study and Aims

The study was conducted at the Free University of Bolzano (Unibz), a multilingual university located in the predominantly German-speaking province of South Tyrol in Northern Italy². While many European higher education institutions (HEIs) adopted EMI as a means of achieving internationalisation following the 1999 Bologna Declaration (see Graddol, 1997; Maiworm & Wächter, 2014; Doiz et al., 2011), Unibz is one of a select few to have an official multilingual policy in which English figures as just one language of instruction. Since its founding in 1997, the university has pursued plurilingualism as an educational goal by integrating content and languages across its faculties and degree programmes, with exit requirements for students in all official languages of instruction. In addition to the three main languages of instruction – German, Italian and English – a fourth language, Ladin, is used in the Faculty of Education. This plurilingual approach seeks to put into practice a ‘glocal vision’ that is at once defined by a strong local habitus whilst simultaneously looking beyond territorial borders toward the global community (Mastellotto & Zanin, 2021).

The study focuses on the design and implementation of a 4-credit course entitled “English for Social Work” offered as part of the 120-credit Master’s Degree in “Innovation and Research for Social Work and Social Education” (IRIS MA) in the 2021/2022 academic year. The IRIS MA is aimed at graduates of bachelor programmes as well as experienced professionals with an interest in further studies in social and human sciences. In addition to the core areas of social work and social policy, the curriculum is enriched by courses in law, economics and administration, as well as, psychology ethics, anthropology and pedagogy, which are tailored to provide the various research skills and professional competences needed for the innovative management of social services. Given the multilingual nature of all degree

programmes at Unibz, the IRIS MA offers courses in the three official languages of instruction – English, German, Italian – requiring students to have a sufficient level of linguistic competence in all three to successfully follow lectures and complete course assignments.

The course in question, “English for Social Work”, is a 20-hour ESP course designed to provide English language input for situated speaking and writing practice for the development of students’ advanced competences in English for academic and specific purposes. In particular, the course covers content-based input in English on key issues related to the field of social work that includes ageing and well-being, models of disability, social isolation and loneliness. ‘Soft skills’, such as interpersonal skills and listening with empathy, are presented as part of a broader reflection on intercultural awareness, sensitivity and cross-cultural communication in English for social work and social services.

In addition, the course aims to develop students’ communication skills associated with speaking for academic and professional audiences in the sector, focusing on the preparation of a brief presentation in which students must tell a compelling research story, on linguistic forms for effective oral communication, and on stylistic techniques for engaging an audience. Furthermore, students develop productive skills in writing reports and proposals related to issues in the field of social services and social policies, learning to recognise and apply the features of effective written discourse in English for academic and professional purposes. The choice of text types was informed by the pre-course information gathered through conversations with EMI instructors. Since students were required to produce ‘reports’ and ‘proposals’ in their EMI courses, the structural and stylistic elements of these genres were addressed explicitly in the ESP course in order to favour an integrative approach to learning. In this way, the ESP course offers practice of various skills necessary for social work professionals, including textual analytical skills and case reporting skills.

The ESP course occupies an ‘ancillary’ status, as defined in the introductory section above, as it has fewer hours of instruction (20 hours compared to 30+ hours) than several core disciplinary courses offered through EMI: “Social Work and Social Theory” (6 credits); “Inter- and Transcultural Approaches in Communicative and Organizational Processes” (6 credits); “Quantitative Methods in Social Research” (6 credits); “Social Entrepreneurship Education” (5 credits). The ESP course provides support for students’ use of English in these EMI courses by addressing disciplinary topics and the associated language necessary to follow content instruction, make the most of affordances that arise during lessons, and carry out course assignments successfully.

In spite of this complementary role, the ESP course is not to be considered as an ‘adjunct’ course per se since there was no reciprocal coordination between the ESP and EMI instructors in 2021/2022 to prepare mutually aligned courses. An integrated approach, through joint planning of learning aims and assessments for both content and language, is not, in fact, a formalised practice between linguistic and

non-linguistic content specialists within the IRIS MA. This is reflective of a more general situation at Unibz where the multilingual strategy is not fully embedded across the curriculum: language policy and language practice are not always fully aligned and more effort is needed to integrate content and language learning aims across degree programmes (see Mastellotto & Zanin, 2021; Prior, 2021; Quick, 2021).

The ESP course “English for Social Work” made a step in this direction in 2021/22 by offering a partially integrated syllabus, as will be explained in the section below, seeking to coordinate EMI/ESP frameworks in order to enhance integration in student learning. Action research methodology seeks transformative change through the simultaneous process of taking action and doing research, which are linked together by critical reflection on teaching practice (Reason & Bradbury, 2007). This process can be viewed as a form of disciplined inquiry utilised by instructors and researchers to better understand student learning and teacher effectiveness. An action research approach involving all stakeholders (instructors in EMI/ESP, researchers, students, etc.) in a reflective process of progressive problem solving, one that integrates research, action, and analysis, was initiated in the 2021/22 academic year with the present study.

Research Questions

The main research questions framing the present study are:

- RQ1: What synergies between EMI and ESP frameworks in the curricular design of an English course in social work and social services can facilitate integration in student learning?
- RQ2: How can post-course reflection through action research lead to(re)planning and syllabus (re)design of the ESP course for improved integration in future implementation?

“An action research approach involving all stakeholders (instructors in EMI/ESP, researchers, students, etc.) in a reflective process of progressive problem solving, one that integrates research, action, and analysis, was initiated in the 2021/22 academic year with the present study.”

Data Sample and Instruments

Efforts to align ESP and EMI learning aims in the pre-course syllabus design of “English for Social Work” and the subsequent post-course reflection on its impact on students’ competences were carried out as the initial phase of action research in the 2021/2022 academic year when distancing measures due to the Covid-19 pandemic were still in effect.

The data sample includes the 8 participating students (S1 to S8) enrolled in the second year of the two-year IRIS MA (i.e. the full cohort), all of whom have a multilingual profile, as illustrated in Table 2 below.

Table 2

Multilingual profile of participants according to the global scale of the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) for languages.

Participant	German	Italian	English
S1	C2	C1	B2
S2	C2	C1	B2
S3	C1	C2	B2
S4	C2	B2	B1
S5	C2	B2	B1
S6	C2	C1	B2
S7	C2	B2	C1
S8	C1	C2	B1

No minimum entry level for English language proficiency was required as a prerequisite for the course since the official Unibz language strategy requires a B2-level as an entry requirement in only two of the three languages of instruction (German, Italian, English), allowing for the third language (L3) to be acquired over the student’s course of studies. Consequently, English proficiency varied considerably among the sample group – from C1 to B1 – as illustrated above, given that for some it is their L2, and for others their L3. The content courses in the IRIS MA do not focus on developing students’ language competences in any of the three languages of instruction, but expect that students have a good command of academic discourse and are able to use it effectively in oral and written contexts in all three languages. Furthermore, students are required to meet the official exit requirements established by the Unibz multilingual policy by the end of the two-year IRIS MA – C1 in the L1, C1 in the L2, B1 in the L3³ – and are encouraged to follow general language courses at the University’s Language Centre to prepare for the language certification exams.

Participants in the data sample were all ‘working students’, that is, all were employed in the field of social work and social education while simultaneously enrolled in the IRIS MA in 2021/2022. Consequently, the lecturer negotiated the course timetable with students to accommodate their needs: 10 lessons of 2 hours (instead of 5 lessons of 4 hours) were scheduled one evening per week from 17.00-19.00 over a

10-week period from October to December 2021. The course was conducted online through videoconferencing in Microsoft Teams and supported by the use of a Moodle platform.

The instructor developed and administered a post-course questionnaire in January 2022 in order to gather student feedback on various aspects of the course design regarding both the process and product of learning, with a view towards improving the course design for future teaching. The survey contained twelve questions, (please see Appendix) including multiple choice, rated scale and open questions in which students were invited to leave comments in their language of choice. Students were guaranteed anonymity by completing the survey online (Google Survey) without inserting their names or email addresses as identification.

Results

Partially Integrated Syllabus Design

Notwithstanding the lack of formal coordination across the IRIS MA, efforts to integrate ESP and EMI were made through the syllabus design at two levels. First, the ESP instructor sought to align the syllabus of “English for Social Work” with the specific knowledge and skills needed by students as identified by the Director of Studies and by several EMI professors teaching on the IRIS MA, all content experts in the field of social services and social policies.

Second, the ESP instructor consulted students during the first lesson on the selection of units of study in order to align the language focus of subsequent lessons with topics or issues that were domain-specific and which they considered of particular interest and relevance. Drawing on two key reference books, namely Geraldine Ludbrook’s *English for International Social Work* (2011) and Mary Ellen Toffle’s

English Communication for Social and Human Services (2017), a range of possible topics was proposed, and students chose those of greater interest. Based on these preferences, materials and web-based resources were uploaded to the e-learning platform for the course and English language teaching aims were defined for students’ oral and written production.

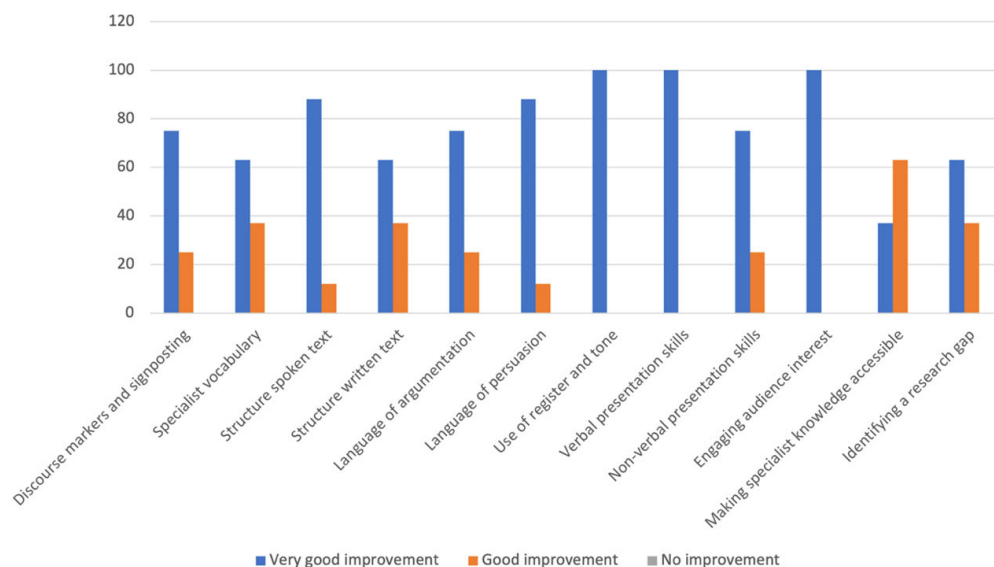
The language tasks were adapted to the learning aims, to the level of students and to progression across the course. While the summative assessment format for the course was set by the instructor – a mid-term assignment (oral presentation) and a final written exam (open-book, take-home writing task) – the content for both tasks was freely chosen by the students following guidelines on structural, stylistic and linguistic conventions provided by the instructor. Feedback from students indicates that these steps to integrate ESP and EMI elements helped improve their learning, as detailed in the section below. The need for further integration and alignment through syllabus redesign emerges as a key finding of the exploratory study and is addressed in the Discussion section below.

Feedback from Questionnaire

Based on responses to survey Q2, overall, 100% of students were satisfied with the course: 63% claimed that it was ‘very effective’ and 37% ‘effective’ in helping them to improve their use of English for specific purposes in relation to the field of social work and social services. 100% reported they had made progress in oral communication while 75% of participants reported progress in written communication as well.

The following graph (Figure 1) presents a percentage breakdown of specific areas of academic language and literacy in which participants reported improvement in their competences.

Figure 1. A percentage overview of the specific competences improved through academic language and literacy training in the ESP course “English for Social Work”.



In terms of the domain-specific topics selected through the partially negotiated syllabus, student preferences are distributed as follows: ‘social isolation and populations at risk’ ranked first with 88% of participants finding it ‘interesting and relevant’ for the development of disciplinary language skills; ‘healthy lifestyle and wellbeing’ and ‘forms of disability’ each had approval from 63% of participants, and ‘longevity and ageing’ ranked third in student preferences with 50% approval.

Learning specialist lexis such as ‘disability’, and its various collocations (‘physical disability’, ‘mental disability’, ‘learning disability’, ‘models of disability’), as well as usages of terms like ‘disabled people’, ‘disabling world’, and ‘people with disabilities/impairments’, which are examples of emergent language during lesson discussions, enables the meaning of content-related concepts to be consolidated through use of domain-specific communication in English. Similarly, students’ understanding of the differences between the social model of disability and other models (religious model, welfare model, medical model) emerges through an understanding of the language used to describe these models and their distinctive characteristics.

Similarly, concepts such as ‘social isolation’, ‘social withdrawal’, ‘loneliness’ and ‘depression’, all inter-related phenomena that have increased exponentially during the Covid-19 period affecting different vulnerable populations and putting pressure on social workers and social services, are consolidated through lexical learning, some planned and some emergent. Understanding these phenomena and their impacts depends on understanding technical definitions and their nuances; for example, ‘social isolation’ as a lack of social connections or lack of frequency in social interactions defined by objective measures, which may lead to ‘loneliness’ in some people, a subjective feeling of being alone. It is clear that aligning learning aims in ESP and EMI is key to students’ understanding since the meaning of concepts (content) is supported through an understanding of the language (form) used to express them.

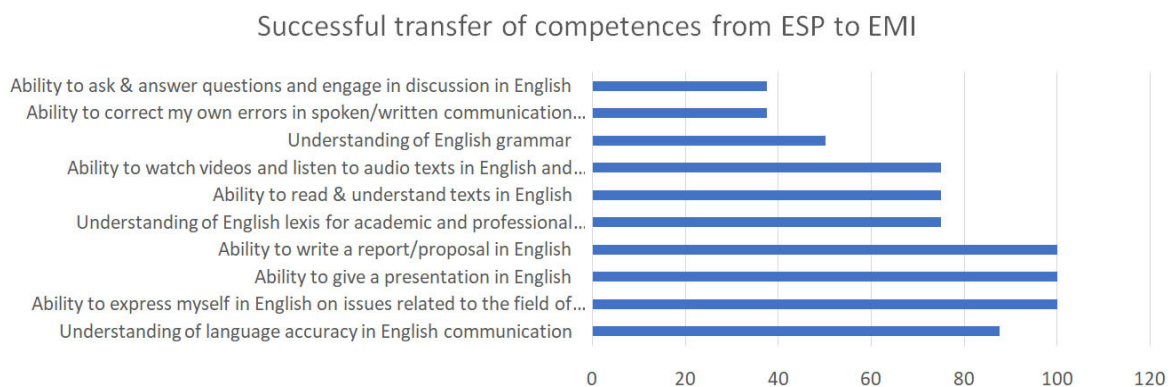
In relation to the question, “Did the ‘English for Social Work’ course help you to improve your English-language competences in other IRIS courses taught in English?”, 100% of participants responded ‘yes’. Several respondents identified the EMI course in Anthropology, “Inter- and Transcultural Approaches in Communicative and Organizational Processes”, as the one in which they were able to most usefully transfer English-language knowledge and skills, citing their “ability to structure a report” and their “enhanced language accuracy in English communication” as examples of knowledge transfer (Olson & Kim, 2022; Whicker, 2022). The EMI course in question required students to write an English-language report as one of the assessments, a task they felt well-prepared for given the focus on report-writing in the ESP course which developed their understanding of the structural and stylistic conventions for this text type as well as the linguistic features suitable to the intended audience and communicative task.

The following chart (Figure 2) illustrates the specific knowledge and skills students believed they were able to transfer from the ESP to EMI context based on their self-reporting.

Discussion of Findings

The findings of this first phase of action research indicate that efforts to integrate ESP and EMI had a positive impact on student learning. In relation to RQ1 –What synergies between EMI and ESP frameworks in the curricular design of an English course in social work and social services can facilitate integration in student learning? – two key findings emerged from the study. First, it was found that a focus on form when coupled with a focus on content through a selection of issues deriving from the field of social work resulted in greater consolidation of knowledge and skills in the ESP course, as evidenced by students’ self-reported improvement

Figure 2. A breakdown by percentage of specific competences successfully transferred from ESP to EMI.



in domain-specific communication, both written and oral (Figure 1). This result is consistent with studies carried out on the role of language of the discipline and language in the discipline in content-and-language integrated learning contexts, which demonstrate that conceptual meaning and linguistic form are inseparable in learning (see Leisen, 2004; Ricci Garotti, 2021).

Second, the study demonstrated that enhanced integration also favoured knowledge transfer from ESP to EMI context as students reported a greater level of preparedness and ability in carrying out the written report required as an assessment output in the EMI course in light of the targeted support received in the ESP course. In particular, students reported a better understanding of structural and stylistic conventions related to report writing and were able to use academic language effectively (Figure 1). This is consistent with Rose et al.'s (2020) finding that academic English skills were statistically significant predictors of success in EMI, suggesting that lower proficiency students require more ESP/EAP support in order to increase their likelihood of success in English-taught programmes. Since students are not receiving that support in English-taught courses in the IRIS MA, it is vital that the ESP course focuses on academic language.

The findings indicate two areas of limited transfer success (less than 40%): firstly, in students' ability to ask and answer questions and engage in spontaneous discussion in English, suggesting that more attention is needed to oracy beyond the preparation and delivery of a presentation; secondly, in their capacity for self-correction, suggesting the need for enhanced noticing and retention of lexicogrammatical structures. Notwithstanding, the findings also indicate several benefits for students in terms of heightened English language awareness regarding appropriacy of register

“First, it was found that a focus on form when coupled with a focus on content through a selection of issues deriving from the field of social work resulted in greater consolidation of knowledge and skills in the ESP course, as evidenced by students' self-reported improvement in domain-specific communication, both written and oral.”

“Second, the study demonstrated that enhanced integration also favoured knowledge transfer from ESP to EMI context as students reported a greater level of preparedness and ability in carrying out the written report required as an assessment output in the EMI course in light of the targeted support received in the ESP course.”

and tone. Additionally, students reported greater receptive comprehension and improved productive competences in oral and written discourse for domain-specific communication. Moreover, they reported development in key academic language and literacy skills which are central to their post-graduate studies since the transmission of content in academic disciplines consists in understanding concepts expressed through vocabulary that is at times technical (ESP) but is embedded in academic language (EAP) shaped by the discursive practices of a language community. Finally, the ability to transfer knowledge and skills from one course (ESP) to another (EMI), as indicated in Figure 2, underlines the development of 'higher order thinking skills' (Bloom et al., 1956) that go beyond the learning of facts and concepts and involve analysis, evaluation, and synthesis/creation of new knowledge; these cognitive skills are transversal and can be applied in novel situations across the curriculum. These findings within the context of the sample support most EMI-based language teachers' hypotheses that immersion-only language learning is not sufficient for acquiring the linguistic skills necessary for success in higher education.

As regards RQ2 – How can post-course reflection through action research lead to (re)planning and syllabus (re) design of the ESP course for improved integration in future implementation? – the need for progressive problem solving that integrates research, action, and analysis more fully. Action research methodology begins by building a knowledge base to better understand the effectiveness of the subsequent action or plan being considered; this small-scale study contributes to creating that knowledge base through initial data collection and analysis. To obtain enriched knowledge of the phenomenon and a more comprehensive description, further investigation is needed with other sources of data (e.g. interviews) and additional sample groups in order to triangulate data and validate these preliminary findings.

Additionally, further action is needed to optimise student learning and teacher effectiveness, including the development and implementation of a coordinated plan or strategy to address the focus of the research and the specific problem under investigation, namely, how to effectively integrate the EMI/ESP frameworks. Following an initial teaching cycle for “English for Social Work” and post-course reappraisal, it is clear that such integration must be a bilateral process among EMI/ESP instructors with curricular alignment of content and language integrated learning as a mutual goal.

Spolsky’s (2004) model of language policy envisages integration at the level of language management, language beliefs, and language practices. The premise is that the official language plan or policy at the institutional level should be integrated with beliefs about how language acquisition works and how languages should be taught, and these should be aligned with the actual practices implemented in classrooms. This multi-layered vision of a “practiced language policy” (Bonacina-Pugh, 2012) underlines the need for a bottom-up perspective that can evaluate how the effectiveness of a language policy is constructed through real classroom practices. The present study indicates that, in order to be successful in supporting student learning, classroom practices in ESP and in EMI should be more thoroughly aligned.

Conclusion

The present case study explores this nexus of integration by examining how language learning in a domain-specific context could be enhanced through greater integrative practices for ESP and EMI. Drawing on Biggs’s “Constructive Alignment Model” (1996, 2007, 2011) in higher education, an integrated ESP/EMI syllabus design would need to take into account all three dimensions of effective planning – learning aims, instructional strategies and assessment practices – to ensure optimal alignment and enhance the quality of teaching and learning. Such alignment would require concerted coordination across ESP and EMI courses in order to integrate content and language learning across these three fields and fully optimise the integration of frameworks. The need for a bilateral process of integration emerges as a finding of this first phase of action research

Through its partially negotiated syllabus design and integrative practices, the ESP course analysed takes a step in this direction following an initial plan-teach-reflect-assess cycle, but greater involvement of EMI instructors and coordination between ESP and EMI instructors in the IRIS MA is needed to optimise alignment in all dimensions and progress to subsequent cycles of action research. Additionally, further investigation is needed with additional sample groups of students and with the application of varied instruments (e.g. interviews) of data collection to validate findings through triangulation. Furthermore, expanding the sample group to

include participants from other disciplinary contexts would be necessary in order to identify a comprehensive framework for integrative practices across disciplines and validate the findings of the present study. Future research could address the potential benefits of enhanced ESP/EMI integration, not only for students, but also for lecturers teaching in EMI, thus building on recent research on teacher cognition and language awareness (see Borg, 2003; Mastellotto & Zanin, 2021; Quick, 2021). ■

Notes

- 1 This article was developed by both authors. Specifically, Francesca G. Costa is the author of the sections from the start of ‘Introduction’ to the end of ‘Methodology and research procedures’ and Lynn Mastellotto is the author of the sections from the start of ‘Context of the study and aims’ to the end of ‘Conclusion’.
- 2 Data show that 65.3% of South Tyroleans identify German as their first language (L1), 27.4% Italian, 4.1% Ladin, and 8.6% other first languages (ASTAT, 2015, 2018). Ladin, a Romance language spoken in the Dolomite region, has an official minority language status in South Tyrol and, as such, is recognized by legislative frameworks which offer it explicit protection.
- 3 These are the language competence exit levels foreseen in the Unibz language strategy across the university for the three main languages of instruction (German, Italian, English); L1 refers to the student’s first language, L2 to the second language and L3 to the third.

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Appendix

Questionnaire for IRIS MA students Post-course survey – “English for Social Work”

1. Please indicate your current level of language competence (CEFR) for your languages of study.
A1/A2 = beginners B1/B2 = intermediate C1/C2 = advanced

	A1	A2	B1	B2	C1	C2
English						
German						
Italian						

2. How effective overall was the course “English for Social Work” in helping you to improve your use of English for specific purposes in relation to the field of social work and social services?
(1-4 scale: 1 = high, 4 = low)

1. Very effective
2. Somewhat effective
3. Not very effective
4. Ineffective

3. Which topics and resources did you find most interesting? Please rate your interest on a 4-point scale (1= high, 4 = low)

1 = high interest 2 = good interest 3 = some interest 4 = little or no interest

- Longevity and ageing
- Healthy lifestyle & wellbeing
- Physical /mental /learning disabilities
- Models of disability
- Social isolation and vulnerable populations

4. Are there other topics you wish we would have covered in the course? If so, please indicate these in the space below and give a brief reason why.

5. In what area(s) do you feel you made progress in the course?

1. Oral communication in English for specific purposes
2. Written communication in English for specific purposes
3. Other? _____

6. Which specific aspects of English language use did you improve? Please rate your improvement on a 3-point scale: greatly improved; moderately improved; no improvement

- Use of discourse markers and signposting language for textual cohesion
- Use of specialist vocabulary in communication related to the field of social services
- Structure of a spoken text (general-to-specific pattern)
- Structure of a written text (problem-solution pattern)
- Language of argumentation (claims, evidence, nominalizations, hedgers & boosters)
- Language of persuasion (humour/idioms/expressive language, making recommendations, stating benefits/impact)
- Use of register and tone (formal/informal, impersonal/personal)
- Verbal presentation skills (voice, prosody, pronunciation, thought groups, focus words, rhetorical devices)
- Non-verbal presentation skills (gestures, posture, facial expressions, visual aids)
- Engaging audience interest (hooks, repetitions, narrative frames, quotations)
- Making specialist knowledge accessible to a general audience (analogy, simplification, contextualization)
- Identifying a research gap and claiming a research space for yourself

7. Are there other aspects of English language use you would have liked to practice more during the course? Please use the space below to comment.

8. Did the “English for Social Work” course help you to improve your English-language competences for other IRIS courses taught in English?

- YES
- NO

9. If yes, please indicate in which specific course(s) you saw benefits and give an example:

10. If yes, please indicate which knowledge and competences you were able to transfer. Select as many as apply:

- My understanding of English lexis for academic and professional communication
- My understanding of English grammar for academic and professional communication
- My understanding of language accuracy in English communication
- My ability to express myself in English on issues related to the field of social work
- My ability to read and understand texts in English
- My ability to watch videos and listen to audio recordings in English and understand them
- My ability to ask & answer questions and engage in discussions in English

- My ability to give a presentation in English
- My ability to write a proposal and report in English
- My ability to correct my own errors in spoken/written communication in English
- Other? (please specify below)

11. Are you satisfied overall with the organizational aspects of the course? Please rate your level of satisfaction for the specific aspects below: very satisfied /somewhat satisfied /somewhat unsatisfied /very unsatisfied

- Timetable (17.00-19.00)
- Remote learning on Teams
- 20-hour course (4 credits)
- Assessment 1 – 3MT speech (50%)
- Assessment 2 – final written exam (50%)

12. How could the “English for Social Work” course be improved for the future? Please use the space below to comment freely.

Sent to:

S1, S2, S3, S4, S5, S6, S7, S8