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ELF is the glue that binds us: Negotiating linguistic and pedagogical practices in an online EMI professional development course

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ABSTRACT

This study explores how university educators engage with English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) in a Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL) professional development course for English-Medium Instruction (EMI). The study is guided by the following research questions: how do university educators from diverse disciplines engage with ELF in a COIL EMI professional development course; in what ways do their interactions, reflections, and evolving language ideologies shape their teaching practices, professional identities, and sense of community? It adopts a mixed methods design: quantitative analysis maps interaction patterns among participants in the course forum and measures text complexity of their posts, while qualitative thematic analysis uncovers participants' reflections on language, pedagogy, and identity. Quantitative analysis showed that some groups had lengthier and deeper exchanges than others. Groups with more interaction tended to feature posts with less complex, more readable text. Thematic analysis identified three overarching themes: language ideology and power dynamics, navigating identity and growth, and implications for teaching and learning. In the forum, ELF served not only as a communicative tool, but also as a catalyst for pedagogical adaptation, emotional expression, and community building. The study highlights the transformative potential of ELF-aware professional development and underscores the value of reflective, dialogic spaces in fostering inclusive, transnational communities of practice.

1. Introduction

In an increasingly globalized academic landscape, English has emerged as the dominant medium of communication across diverse

VSI: Online behaviour

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linguistic and cultural contexts. This shift has significant implications for higher education, particularly in English-Medium Instruction (EMI) settings. As institutions continue to expand their EMI offerings, there is a growing need to understand how English functions not only as a tool for content delivery but also as a lingua franca that shapes pedagogical practices, cognition, and engagement. The intersection of English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) and EMI raises important questions about language awareness, instructional design, and the dynamics of communication in multilingual classrooms. These issues are further complexified because professional development, peer learning and community building increasingly occur in digital spaces, as in the case of collaborative online international learning (COIL) projects.

This study explores how EMI educators' engagement with ELF influences their approaches to teaching and their participation in an online Community of Practice (CoP). The research is guided by two research questions:

(1) How do university educators from diverse disciplines engage with ELF in a COIL EMI professional development course?
(2) In what ways do their interactions and reflections shape their teaching practices, professional identities, and sense of community?

Through a mixed methods approach, we highlight the potential of ELF-aware professional development to shape inclusive, reflective, and critically aware teaching communities in multilingual, online higher education settings.

The course was designed using principles of COIL, an educational approach that integrates technology, cultural exchange, and global collaboration. It offers a dynamic context for educators to engage with ELF and EMI practices. For educators, COIL can serve as a powerful platform for professional development and support the creation of international professional networks. The next section provides background on the COIL course that serves as the context for this study, outlining its structure, pedagogical underpinnings, and relevance to current debates in EMI and ELF research.

2. Background

This research is based on the 2023-24 edition of a COIL course for the professional development of university educators. The course supports educators in developing and maintaining their English language skills, pedagogical skills and cultural awareness suited for teaching in multilingual and multicultural classrooms. In the 2023-24 edition, 29 educators from 12 institutions in 8 countries were involved. In the project, each partner institution recruits participants and contributes one facilitator for every two participants. Each course participant is then matched with another colleague in a different discipline and country to form a tandem. Participants are matched according to language level, based on a pre-course language test. Matching participants from different disciplines stimulates cross-disciplinary dialogue and the development of new perspectives (Lu, 2022). It also ensures that participants discuss complex topics in accessible terms, much like they would in a classroom setting with students (Valcke & Romero Alfaro, 2016). Each tandem is assigned a course facilitator, who accompanies them on the learning journey. The course is estimated to require 80 h of work for participants and 20 for facilitators. Facilitators have a range of backgrounds: some are educational developers, while others are language specialists or researchers from a variety of disciplines, some of whom have been past participants. Both participants and facilitators receive a certificate of participation at the end of each edition. In the case of facilitators, the certificate recognizes that their role also amounts to personal professional learning. In this paper, 'participants' refers to the educators taking part in the course, while 'facilitators' refers to the educational developers and researchers who guide them through the course.

The course takes place over seven months, with approximately one module per month. The six module topics cover course design, English as a lingua franca, cultures of teaching and learning, global citizenship, group work, and assessment for learning. In the final month, participants complete a reflective writing assignment following an interview with a student. Together with monthly posts in the discussion forum, this assignment constitutes course assessment. Each module proposes materials such as short research papers and videos to stimulate reflection and discussion. Tandems are required to meet online to discuss the topic via Zoom, before joining an online forum to discuss the topic with other course participants. Participants are divided into four discussion groups. In this edition there were 6 or 8 participants with 3-4 facilitators in each forum.

This paper focuses on the discussion forum for the module English as a lingua franca, in which teachers learn about key concepts associated with ELF (Björkman, 2011; Jenkins, 2007; Ur, 2009) and its implications for teaching in international classrooms. The forum on ELF was selected for analysis because of the interest and reflection it sparked among participants. In the 2023-24 edition of the project, the ELF module was the second of six modules, but in the 2024-25 edition, it was made the first module, based on feedback on the course. Participants are given prompts to consider in their tandem conversations and in their forum posts. Each participant is asked to make a post, which constitutes an assignment, and to comment on at least two other posts in their own forum within a five-day period. These factors must inevitably be considered constraints which condition the nature of the forum posts and give interactions an initially formal nature. As Mauranen (2023) notes, online dialogue in blogs and fora works on a slower timescale than speech. In this case, discussion usually extends well beyond the bounds of course requirements, which is one of the aims of the course. In the process of meeting online in tandems and commenting within the groups over six months, participants and facilitators get to know each other, sharing professional experiences and concerns, as well as giving glimpses into their inner lives and identity building as educators.

The design of the COIL EMI professional development course is grounded in a reflective learning paradigm, emphasizing experiential engagement, dialogic inquiry, and critical self-awareness. Drawing on pedagogical frameworks such as Schön's reflective practitioner model (Agomo, 2025; Schön, 1983) and Mezirow's transformative learning theory (Lundgren & Poell, 2016; Mezirow, 1991), the course encourages participants to interrogate their own teaching practices, language ideologies, and cultural assumptions in light of their experiences in multilingual, multicultural classrooms. According to Mezirow (1991, 2000), transformative learning relies

on critical reflection, which involves examining underlying assumptions and challenging habitual ways of interpreting experiences. He defines it as "the process by which we transform our taken-for-granted frames of reference (meaning perspectives, habits of mind, mindsets) to make them more inclusive, discriminating, open, emotionally capable of change, and reflective so that they may generate beliefs and opinions that will prove more true or justified to guide action" (Mezirow, 2000, pp. 7-8). The modular structure of the course—spanning topics from managing group work to global citizenship—scaffolds reflection through tandem dialogues, curated academic resources, and structured forum discussions. This design creates a dynamic interplay between individual reflection and collaborative meaning-making, enabling participants to co-construct knowledge across disciplinary and cultural boundaries. The course thus presents a fertile site for exploring several under-researched areas, including the role of COIL in EMI professional development, the enactment of ELF practices in global and online settings, the persistence of language ideologies and inequalities in EMI, and the emergence of online communities of practice among educators navigating internationalized higher education.

2.1. COIL professional development for EMI

As EMI continues to expand globally, the need for effective professional development of university educators has become increasingly urgent (Lasagabaster, 2022; Sun, 2023). Traditional in-person training risks failing to address the diverse linguistic, pedagogical, and contextual challenges faced by EMI educators, particularly in transnational and multilingual environments (Deroey, 2023; Geller, 2011). In response, online professional development has emerged as a flexible and scalable alternative, enabling sustained engagement, peer collaboration, and reflective practice across geographical boundaries (Hartle, 2020).

One such model is COIL, which connects educators across institutions and regions to co-develop and co-teach modules (Mair, 2025). COIL professional development, with participants from a range of linguacultures tackling global educational issues, enables a glocal perspective to be integrated. A glocal classroom (Selvi & Rudolph, 2018) is one in which educators incorporate the diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds of students while also addressing global issues and contexts, thereby supporting a more inclusive and relevant educational experience. In the context of EMI, COIL-based professional development initiatives are particularly effective in fostering inclusive, dialogic spaces that support the development of ELF awareness and pedagogical adaptability (Eltayb & Valcke, 2024). Moreover, online initiatives promote mutual learning and the negotiation of diverse teaching practices (Swartz, 2021), while also contributing to the formation of transnational professional communities grounded in shared linguistic and pedagogical challenges (Kučerová, 2023).

2.2. ELF practices in global and online settings

ELF has been defined as "any use of English among speakers of different first languages for whom English is the communicative medium of choice, and often the only option" (Seidlhofer, 2011, p. 7). While this definition continues to be endorsed in more recent literature, ELF has evolved to explicitly include English L1 users as well. Jenkins (2015) conceptualises ELF as a multilingua franca in global settings. Most scholars emphasise the importance of cooperation and the use of pragmatic strategies for the purpose of finding common ground (Seidlhofer & Widdowson, 2022). One of the most significant developments in ELF has been the decoupling of English language use from so-called native speaker norms and monolingual understandings (Cheng et al., 2021), so that English language use is no longer measured against native speaker use, but instead in terms of efficiency and efficacy. As a field of study, ELF research focuses on understanding interactions in English as a lingua franca among participants with different lingua-cultural backgrounds (Jenkins, 2007, 2014).

Dynamism and fluidity are widely identified as characteristics of ELF (Baker, 2015). ELF research has highlighted the way linguistic and cultural practices are "continually renewed and cooperatively modified to create new meanings and identities, while at the same time meeting local needs" (Kalocsai, 2014, p. 21). ELF has been studied in terms of metalanguage (Mauranen, 2023) and the way users show and express awareness of their non-native status and feelings of linguistic inadequacy (Cogo, 2010) or insecurities (Jenkins, 2007). Conversational analyses of ELF oral interactions have identified the cooperative strategies used for interaction and negotiation of meaning such as accommodation, pre-emptive moves, repetition and code-switching (Jenkins, 2007). As in other interactional settings, humour has also been noted as a tool for facilitating empathy and solidarity among ELF users (Pullin, 2017).

Such features are also considered to be part of computer-mediated English as a Lingua Franca (CMELF), which refers to the use of ELF in digital and online settings. In the last decade, research into ELF in digital environments has attracted significant attention (Franceschi & Vettorel, 2017; Mauranen, 2023). A distinguishing feature of CMELF interaction is the availability of multimodal resources, including typographical features like emoticons, emoji, memes, gifs, audio recordings and images, which can be used to enhance mutual understanding (Bosso, 2020). Digital settings facilitate the formation of discourse communities that are made up of non-local, heterogeneous members who communicate through ELF (Bosso, 2020; Mauranen et al., 2016).

Recent scholarship has increasingly turned its attention to the intersection of ELF and EMI in online and digitally mediated environments, exploring how ELF is enacted in virtual classrooms, collaborative platforms, and professional development programmes, where participants from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds negotiate meaning and co-construct knowledge. Studies have highlighted how digital affordances such as asynchronous discussion forums, video conferencing, and multimodal communication tools shape ELF interactions and foster inclusive pedagogical practices in EMI contexts (Brebera and Bezdíčková, 2023; Tartera, 2023; Moosa, 2022). The shift from native-speaker norms to communicative effectiveness is particularly salient in online EMI, where ELF users draw on a range of linguistic and cultural resources to ensure mutual understanding and engagement (Choe and Lee, 2024). As global higher education continues to expand its digital reach, understanding ELF in EMI online settings is becoming increasingly relevant for equitable and effective international teaching and learning. Emerging research speculates on the implications of machine

translation and artificial intelligence for the status of English and ELF in particular (Guido, 2025). It remains to be seen whether these technologies will disrupt or displace the linguistic hegemony of English in the near future (Zeng & Yang, 2024) and what effect they will have on online academic communication. For example, will it be possible to observe authentic ELF interactions and accommodation strategies in online settings in which text has been generated or modified using AI tools?

2.3. Language ideologies in EMI: ELF awareness and inequality

Studies of the pedagogical consequences and implications of ELF for English language teaching have been carried out (Baker, 2015). Language teachers have been shown to regard Anglophone varieties of English as more prestigious, even after undergoing training regarding global English varieties and ELF (Baker, 2015). There are fewer studies on the implications of ELF for content teaching in EMI settings. Some professional development programmes attempt to address native-speaker ideology by raising awareness of ELF (Guarda & Helm, 2017) to "empower content lecturers by allowing them to focus on their disciplinary expertise" (Molino et al., 2023, p. 99) and to counter deficit narratives about their use of English (Waddington, 2024). Two studies of online EMI professional development address university teachers' beliefs about ELF expressed in a forum. Nashaat-Sobhy and Sánchez-Garcia (2020) analysed and measured lecturers' attitudes to English using Appraisal Theory, while Sánchez-Garcia and Nashaat-Sobhy (2020) used the EMEMUS framework to analyse teachers' beliefs about ELF. The studies found collaborative professional peer learning promoted a sense of belonging. The authors argue that EMI teachers' concerns about ELF need further attention and should be the subject of critical reflection.

Important questions about linguistic and epistemic inequalities and language ideologies in EMI settings have emerged in recent research, as Cogo et al. (2024) outline. The authors note that the spread of EMI worldwide is "neither sociopolitically nor sociolinguistically neutral and is affecting the local ecologies and power relations among languages" (Cogo et al., 2024, p. 55). Prioritizing native English varieties has been shown to enhance inequalities for both teachers and students, but there is also concern about monolingual ideologies leading to "English-only" policies being adopted in EMI.

Moreover, researchers perceive biases and disadvantages when it comes to academic publishing (Cogo et al., 2024). The danger is, as several studies point out (Cogo et al., 2024; Kuteeva, 2023; Zheng & Qiu, 2023), that the dominance of one language may lead to the prevalence of theories, methods and worldviews associated with it. Moreover, it is not yet clear whether the hegemony of English in academic and digital settings will shift as real-time translation software is adopted in these environments, potentially facilitating multilingualism. Zeng and Yang (2024) note that due to the global dominance of English in the tech sector, there is a risk that such tools could instead reinforce the position of English in these domains (2024). In a similar vein, Guido's study (2025) argues that AI and machine translation software are bringing about a standardisation of English, threatening ELF diversity and operating as a form of linguistic imperialism.

Teachers' language awareness and attitudes were also addressed in a recent study by Sperti (2024). The study analyses data from an ELF forum for English language teachers at primary and secondary level in the Erasmus + ENRICH professional development programme. The paper investigates participants' online communicative practices in the forum, as well as their beliefs about ELF. It found teachers were particularly supportive and cooperative in the part of the forum regarding ELF-aware teaching through a range of mediation strategies and speech acts, including lexical choices (evaluation and emotion), discourse markers, reformulations and questions, and verbs of mental processes (Sperti, 2024).

2.4. (Online) communities of practice and EMI

Wenger's seminal concept of Communities of Practice (CoP) situates learning as social practice and as a process. Wenger (1998, p. 49) explains that "mutual engagement, a joint enterprise, and a shared repertoire of ways of doing things" comprise the three dimensions of the relationship between practice and community. As the medium through which participants in a CoP are involved in exchanging experiences of everyday life and work situations, language is central to the concept. However, the important role of language and negotiation of meaning is largely implicit in Wenger's initial conceptualisation of CoPs and has since been extended and explored more (Barton & Tusting, 2005).

Collaboration across disciplinary boundaries has been identified as a beneficial approach to EMI professional development. Research indicates that when EMI teachers engage in collaborative practices, their attitudes towards EMI teaching improve, suggesting that shared experiences can foster a more supportive professional community (Lu, 2022; Macaro et al., 2016). In Lu's (2022) study, participants' initial insecurity about EMI changed through the positive experience of teamwork and interdisciplinary teacher collaboration. Kontinnen (2022) proposes that CoPs should be strongly promoted in EMI training because of their potential as sites of peer support and collective problem solving. Nkambule and Tang (2024) argue that CoPs can be used in EMI for effective bottom-up, grassroot level professional development that offers ongoing, tailored support. Their study of participants in a Taiwanese CoP for EMI showed that collective learning was important for teaching innovation and that top-down institutional support and policy for such programmes is fundamental. The study showed "cameraderie and psychological safety" (Nkambule & Tang, 2024, p. 735) were key elements of the CoP's collaborative learning function and were motivating factors for participation. It also found that a common thread among participants was anxiety about English language competence and uncertainty about pedagogical practice. The CoP provided them with a safe space in which to share experiences and practical EMI strategies. The CoP involved in-person meetings, but the authors propose their framework for use in other contexts.

Although studies suggest that "online teacher CoPs are effective to promote collaboration, support and reflection, and can improve instructional practices and self-efficacy" (Boada, 2022, p. 290), there is little research that specifically relates to online teacher CoPs in

EMI settings. Orduna-Nocito & Sánchez-García (2022) refer to a "community of practice" in their study of EMI educators taking part in online professional development, but their analysis was focused on internationalisation policy, institutional language policy and teachers' perceptions. Likewise, Sánchez-Garcia and Nashaat-Sobhy (2020) mention a CoP, but it is not the main focus of analysis. The concept of a CoP was more central to the ENRICH project: participants would have liked more interaction with peers and mentors due to the potential of the CoP "to increase collective intelligence to an even higher degree" (Sifakis et al., 2022, p. 275).

3. Methods

This study employed a mixed methods design, combining quantitative and qualitative approaches to explore how university educators engage with ELF in a transnational professional development context. Quantitative data was used to map interaction patterns and assess text complexity, while qualitative data was analysed to uncover participants' perceptions, emotions, and pedagogical reflections. This design enabled a comprehensive understanding of both the structure of interaction in the forum and the experiential dimensions of communication and learning in the COIL course.

3.1. Research context

The COIL course examined in this study is a professional development and transnational virtual exchange program designed for university educators aiming to enrich their pedagogical skills, linguistic competence, and cultural understanding within the context of a "glocal" (local and global) classroom (Selvi & Rudolph, 2018) in English medium educational settings. This glocal classroom is a dynamic multilingual and multicultural learning environment characterised by varied knowledge systems, cultural and academic backgrounds, disciplines, and languages.

A central element of the COIL course is its emphasis on reflective practice. The course encourages participants to adopt a reflective stance, analysing teaching topics related to internationalisation and the glocal classroom, while exchanging insights and experiences with peers in an online setting. This course has been running since 2014, involving up to 30 participants in each iteration. These participants come from up to 12 higher education institutions (HEIs) located in various countries, primarily in Europe, with the recent addition of a partner in Brazil. They bring multicultural and multilingual backgrounds to the course, which are not necessarily aligned with the country of their HEI. Disciplines range from medicine to engineering, gender studies to literature.

3.2. Participants in the study

In the 2023-2024 iteration of the course, a total of 29 course participants were enrolled, with the support of 15 course facilitators. Of these, 28 participants and 9 facilitators actively contributed to the discussion forum for Module 2: English as a Lingua Franca. Participants represented a range of disciplines, with the most common being Health and Medical Sciences (34.5%), Engineering and Technology (20.7%), and Psychology and Education (17.2%). Other fields such as Biological and Life Sciences, Social Sciences, Public Health and Nursing, and Arts and Humanities were also represented, though in smaller numbers. Geographically, participants were most frequently affiliated with universities in Italy, Sweden, Brazil, and Spain, in that order. 41.4% of participants were female. Discussion groups were balanced to ensure an even distribution of participants.

3.3. Data collection methods

Ethnographic methods were used for data collection. Such methods are common in both CoPs and CMELF research (Baker & Sangiamchit, 2019; Kalocsai et al., 2014). When it comes to online CoPs, ethnographic research involves participatory observation in online spaces to investigate behaviour, practices, and shifting beliefs as interaction unfolds (Kalocsai et al., 2014). In the present study, the authors are also facilitators in the professional development programme and actively took part in the discussion forum under analysis, providing the opportunity for real-time observation of the posts and the discussion they generated within a one-week period, as well as the chance to look back on the forum following the conclusion of the seven-month long course. In this way, the authors witnessed and took part in "reflective discourse" as it unfolded. Daloz (2000, p. 114) describes this conscious, critical reflection as the process in which we "actively dialogue with others to better understand the meaning of an experience". This has allowed for a unique perspective of the data in the form of both participant observation and discourse analysis.

Participants were asked to provide informed consent for the collection and use of their posts and responses in the discussion forum on ELF. To gain an overview of the volume and complexity of interactions, each of the four ELF forums was mapped for interaction patterns. Posts and responses were manually extracted and compiled into a spreadsheet to facilitate anonymisation, systematic coding, and aggregate level analysis.

3.4. Data analysis

3.4.1. Positionality and reflexivity

All five authors acknowledge that our role as facilitators in the project inevitably leads to a higher degree of subjectivity as researchers. To minimise potential bias, we did not analyse the forum we were active in. At the same time, we recognise that thematic analysis is an inherently subjective and interpretative practice (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2022). In keeping with the collaborative nature of the project, the research was conducted collectively via regular online meetings, with data, analysis and writing shared and updated

in real time via the platform Teams. Throughout the process, we reflected together on the patterns that we identified in the data and the role of our different cultural, institutional and disciplinary perspectives in interpreting them.

3.4.2. Exploratory analysis of interaction in forum groups and text complexity

Readability is about how easily understandable a text is, and it plays an important role in making sure written content matches the language skills and thinking abilities of its readers. Text complexity readability was accessed with Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level using Lumos Text Complexity Analyzer (Kincaid et al., 1975; Lumos Learning, 2025). This is calculated according to the number of sentences and the number and length of words. The result indicates the U.S. school grade level needed to comprehend a given text, with higher values corresponding to greater complexity. It can also be interpreted as the number of years of education needed to understand the text, e.g. 5 is an easy text to read, 9 is plain English and more than 12 is difficult to read. Readability analysis provides a clear, measurable way to evaluate how difficult a text is. Using this analysis helped us check whether the texts were accessible to participants from different language backgrounds, which is especially important in ELF settings, where language skills and norms can vary widely.

Complex patterns of interaction between participants were explored graphically using network visualizations and bar plots. Quantitative analyses included the number of interactions, responses, word counts, comment length, and likes. English proficiency level was measured for each participant at the beginning of the course with a standardized questionnaire of 80 questions according to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR).

3.4.3. Coding process and reflective thematic analysis

Four out of the five authors were involved in the coding process. An initial cycle of inductive coding was undertaken by each of the researchers on one forum, working in an Excel spreadsheet shared through Teams. All researchers could view all codes at any one time. Alongside the coding of *what* participants talk about in relation to ELF, the data was also coded for *how* they developed an online CoP through ELF by annotating interpersonal language, instances of humour and use of multimodal resources to register emotion, share an idea or provide peer feedback. After the first cycle of coding, the researchers met to present an overview of their codes and to agree on how codes could be homogenised. In a second cycle of coding, some codes were renamed to align with other researchers, and emotion and interactional aspects were annotated in a separate column. The analysis followed Braun and Clarke's six-step process (2022), moving from codes to sub-themes to main themes in a reflexive manner that recognised patterns in the data while acknowledging the researcher's role in constructing meaning. There was no intent to measure interrater reliability because we followed reflexive thematic analysis which relies more on ‘dialogic intersubjectivity’. This approach allowed for capturing both the breadth of topics discussed across forums and the depth of participants' experiences with ELF in various contexts.

3.5. Conceptual frameworks used for interpreting data

The interpretation of data in this study was primarily guided by two interrelated conceptual lenses: English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) and Communities of Practice (CoP). These frameworks were particularly relevant for exploring how university educators from diverse linguistic and disciplinary backgrounds engaged with multilingual pedagogies, negotiated professional identities, and co-constructed knowledge in an online learning environment.

The ELF framework (Jenkins, 2015) provided a critical lens for examining how participants navigated language use beyond native-speaker norms, embracing fluid, adaptive, and context-sensitive communication strategies. This perspective was instrumental in analysing how participants reflected on their linguistic ideologies, challenged deficit views of non-native English use, and reimagined their roles as educators in increasingly internationalized and linguistically diverse classrooms.

Simultaneously, the CoP framework (Wenger, 1998) offered a sociocultural perspective on learning as participation in a shared practice. It enabled the research team to explore how participants engaged in mutual reflection, meaning making, and identity negotiation through structured tandem dialogues and asynchronous forum discussions. The online course functioned as a dynamic CoP, where professional growth emerged through sustained interaction, shared challenges, and evolving understandings of teaching in ELF contexts.

In addition, Mezirow's (1991) transformative learning theory, which relies on individuals' critical reflection and ‘perspective transformation’, was also used as a lens for interpreting data. Mezirow (1991) notes that transformation may occur not just in individuals but also collectively. The conditions under which transformation occurs include “the presence of the other, reflective discourse, a mentoring community, and opportunities for committed action” (Daloz, 2000, p. 112). The ELF-aware framework (Sifakis & Bayyurt, 2017) integrates this concept. Thus the (interpretive focus of this study centred on how participants' engagement with ELF and their participation in an online CoP shaped their perspectives on teaching practices, linguistic self-perceptions, and professional development.

Together, these frameworks supported a nuanced and contextually grounded interpretation of the data, highlighting the interplay between language ideologies, collaborative learning, and professional identity formation in a multilingual, online higher education setting.

4. Results

This section presents the findings from both the quantitative and qualitative analyses of participant engagement in the COIL-based EMI professional development module about ELF. The quantitative analysis drew on course meta-data patterns of interaction, participation levels, and linguistic features across groups, while the qualitative analysis explored thematic content emerging from

forum discussions.

4.1. Quantitative analysis of forum interaction

The quantitative analysis examined how participants engaged in the discussion forum across the four groups. Descriptive analyses are presented for each group. Categorical variables are presented with absolute and relative frequency. Quantitative variables are presented with mean (standard deviation - sd). Table 1 summarizes the descriptive characteristics of participants and their interactions, including the number of participants, comments, word counts, facilitator involvement, and readability scores. Fig. 1 provides a visual representation of interaction patterns between participants.

The quantitative analysis revealed distinct patterns of engagement across the four discussion groups shown in Fig. 1 and in the number of interactions, answers, words, and likes in Table 1. Two of the groups were generally more active, producing more comments, longer assignments, and greater interaction overall. Facilitators were also more involved in the three groups with higher interaction. One group received significantly more "likes" per comment, suggesting higher peer recognition, while another group exhibited a higher proportion of late responses.

Readability scores were lower in the more active groups, suggesting that participants used simpler, more conversational language, which may have fostered supportive and inclusive communication. In contrast, the group with fewer interactions showed higher readability scores, likely because their contributions focused more on formal, assignment-oriented content, which tends to be longer and syntactically complex. This pattern aligns with the higher readability grades observed for assignments in Table 1, where structured academic writing requires greater linguistic complexity compared to the overall comments. Only one group with higher interaction had also higher English proficiency level, while the other 3 groups showed a homogenous level, suggesting that readability may not be explained by the English proficiency level.

Fig. 1 illustrates the interaction patterns within each of the four groups, depicting two comment-based dimensions: (a) the number of comments exchanged between each pair of participants (network plots), and (b) the distribution of comments over time (bar plots). An initial overview revealed that two groups generated significantly more discussion than the others, each producing approximately 7000 words centred on ELF in EMI (See Table 1). Considering both sets of graphs together suggests that greater and more sustained facilitator involvement may be associated with higher levels of group interaction. This finding suggests that group composition and facilitator involvement may influence the depth and breadth of engagement.

4.2. Qualitative analysis of forum discussions

Drawing on our research question, the qualitative analysis explored how participants reflected on their linguistic beliefs, navigated emotional and professional challenges, and co-constructed knowledge and community through ELF-mediated interaction. Three overarching themes were constructed through reflexive thematic analysis, each encompassing several sub-themes that illuminate participants' experiences with language, pedagogy, identity, emotion, and interpersonal dynamics. Fig. 2 provides a visual overview of the umbrella themes and their associated sub-themes.

Table 1
Descriptive characteristics of each group divided by 1. Group characteristics, 2. Number of active participants in the discussion, and 3. Interactions and comments.

Characteristics	Group 1	Group 2	Group 3	Group 4
Group characteristics				
Number of participants	7	6	8	8
English proficiency level [a,b]	67.3 (sd 18.5)	68.8 (sd 18.5)	73.6 (sd 15.1)	77.3 (sd 14.3)
Active participation				
Total number of active participants	**9**	**7**	**10**	**11**
Participants	6/9 (66.7%)	6/7 (85.7%)	8/10 (80%)	8/11 (72.7%)
Facilitators	3/9 (33.3%)	1/7 (14.3%)	2/10 (20%)	3/11 (27.3%)
Interactions and comments				
Total number of comments	**35**	**19**	**44**	**55**
Number of comments from participants	22/35 (62.9%)	18/19 (94.7%)	39/44 (88.6%)	39/55 (70.9%)
Number of late answers [c]	1/35 (2.9%)	9/19 (47.4%)	0/44 (0%)	27/55 (17.7%)
Numbers of likes per comment [a]	0.3 (sd 0.5)	0.7 (sd 0.9)	1.6 (sd 0.8)	0.7 (sd 0.9)
Total number of words	3882	2967	7150	6772
Word count per comment [a]	110.9 (sd 97.3)	156.2 (sd 101.8)	162.5 (sd 145.3)	123.1 (sd 115.7) 7
Readability per comment (Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level) [a]	8.9 (sd 2.7)	11.3 (sd 2.7)	9.3 (sd 2.6)	9.3 (sd 3.5)
Word count per assignment [a]	255.3 (sd 147.7)	258.8 (sd 82.5)	369 (sd 187,3)	338.5 (sd 109.6)
Readability per assignment (Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level) [a]	11.3 (sd 2.4)	11.4 (sd 1.5)	10.7 (sd 1.7)	10.7 (sd 1.8)
Word count per answer [a]	81.0 (sd 46.9)	108.8 (sd 70.7)	116.6 (sd 83.8)	86.5 (sd 66.7)

[a] . Mean (standard deviation - sd).
[b] . Standardized questionnaire of 80 questions according to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) measured at the beginning of the course.
[c] . Later than the expected period for comments (17th).

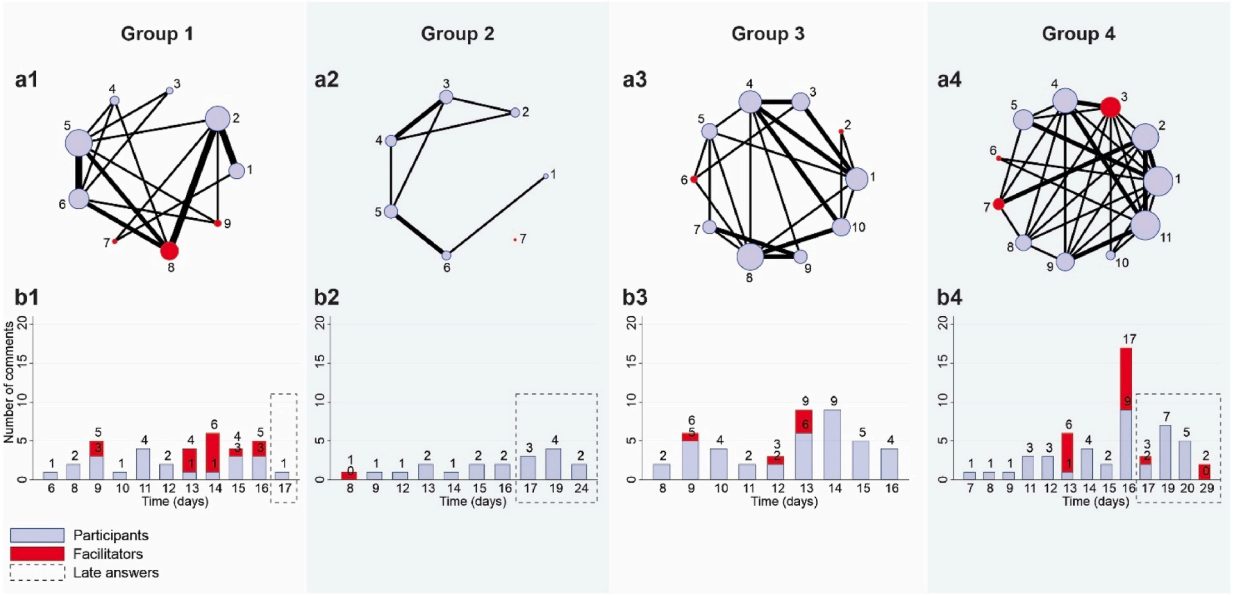

Fig. 1. Interaction patterns within each group using two complementary visualizations: **(a) Network plots (a1–a4)** represent each active participant as a node. Node size reflects the participant's total number of comments, and the width of each connecting edge is proportional to the number of comments exchanged between the corresponding pair of participants. **(b) Bar plots (b1–b4)** show the number of comments by calendar day, with students' comments displayed in blue and facilitators' comments in red. Because comments were expected to occur between the 12th and 16th, any comment posted after the 17th was classified as a "late answer" and is highlighted with dashed outlines.

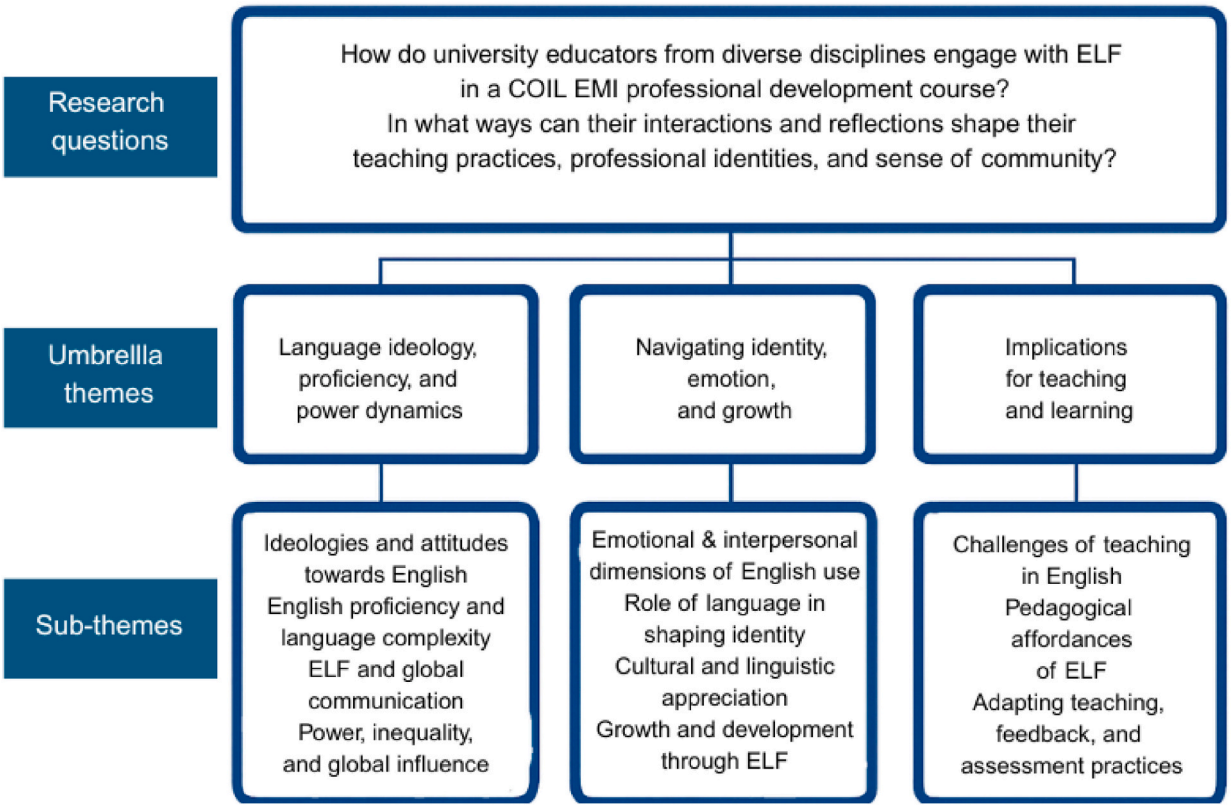

Fig. 2. Thematic structure of forum discussions: Umbrella themes and sub-themes emerging from qualitative analysis.

These themes illustrate how ELF served not only as a communicative medium but also as a lens through which to reflect on inclusive teaching and professional development within a transnational community of practice. Participants' engagement in the topic also emerges through linguistic mediation strategies, verbs of mental processes, rhetorical questions, humour and use of multimodal resources, which interweave all thematic groupings.

4.2.1. Umbrella theme 1: Language ideology, proficiency, and power dynamics

Reflections on the role of language, viewed through the lens of ELF, centred on four key areas: ideologies and attitudes towards English; English proficiency and language complexity; ELF and global communication; and power, inequality, and global influence.

Participants expressed complex and evolving attitudes toward English, shaped by internalised ideologies and the perceived authority of native-speaker norms. The "native speaker" ideal was a recurring theme, often unconsciously internalised. As P15 revealed: "I've always unconsciously aimed to emulate a native speaker," while P14 reflected: "speaking fluently only reinforced my biases […] , the closer 'my' English was to that of native speakers, the better." In contrast, the idea of the "fully competent speaker" offered a more inclusive and empowering alternative. P14 declared that "The idea of 'competent communicators' is a far better approach," while P7 added, "becoming a fully competent speaker feels much more achievable."

As participants engaged more deeply with the concept of ELF, many described the experience in terms of a revelation. They began to distinguish ELF from a traditional English as a Foreign Language (EFL) paradigm, recognising ELF as a dynamic and inclusive mode of global communication. P3 reflected: "I used to believe I had to be a 'native speaker' … ELF is the opportunity to discover a great diversity of exchanges, origins, and accents." For some, this shift reduced anxiety and increased confidence. P26 shared how "this module … has somewhat reduced my sense of linguistic inadequacy." Thus, we witness how participants transform frames of reference that they once took for granted and begin to orient to an ELF mindset.

Participants also described how ELF encouraged them to value multiple perspectives and cultural diversity. P1 described the challenge of recognising students' diverse languages, cultures and viewpoints as a "mind game" that tests "beliefs, preconceptions, and prejudices." P16 noted: "understanding ELF makes me more confident in my own resources." Several participants rejected the pursuit of perfection in favour of communicative competence.

Despite ELF's liberating potential, participants also engaged critically with its entanglement in global power dynamics. They acknowledged that while ELF promotes inclusivity, it remains rooted in Anglocentric structures. P24 observed, "ELF is an 'Anglocentric' concept … yet many colleagues find it liberating." P20 reflected on the dominance of English in academic and professional contexts: "It helped me be aware of the power of a language in teaching and learning." The perceived preference for native English speakers in academia was a recurring concern. P16 noted that "many important researchers … are not invited to speak at scientific meetings," while P13 highlighted that "since English is the official language of the Academy, non-native speakers are at a disadvantage." These reflections underscore persistent epistemic inequalities.

Participants also pointed to students' unequal access to English education. In many contexts, learning English is a privilege reserved for those from higher socioeconomic backgrounds. For individuals in lower-income or marginalised communities, this lack of access makes participation in academic spaces nearly impossible, further widening global inequities. On the other hand, P20 saw ELF as a potential equalizer: "We need a common language that is effective, accessible, and equitable […] ELF is a great facilitator."

4.2.2. Umbrella theme 2: Navigating identity, emotion, and growth

Participants' reflections on their experiences with ELF extended beyond language and pedagogy, touching deeply on personal identity, emotional vulnerability, and professional growth. These insights clustered around four related dimensions: the emotional and interpersonal experience of using English, the role of language in shaping identity, the appreciation of linguistic and cultural diversity, and the potential of ELF awareness to act as a force for personal and professional growth.

Many participants described the emotional weight of using English in professional and social contexts. Feelings of fear, anxiety, and self-doubt were common, particularly around making mistakes or not meeting perceived standards. P11 admitted, "speaking frankly, this fear is conditioning first my pleasure to teach in English." Others echoed this vulnerability, linking it to a sense of inferiority. P13 reflected, "I have always felt my 'non-native English speaker' essence as a big limitation … stress and anxiety … limited access to possible resources because of my fear not to be skilled enough in English." These emotional responses were often accompanied by a sense of shared struggle, as seen in P6's empathetic comment: "You have described perfectly what almost all of us have felt … the effort and frustration involved."

Closely tied to these emotional experiences were reflections on identity and self-perception. Participants described how their relationship with English had shaped their sense of self, both personally and professionally. During the module, however, exposure to ELF prompted a re-evaluation of these beliefs, leading to a more inclusive and flexible understanding of language use. ELF was seen as a space where different accents, speech patterns, and cultural expressions could coexist and be valued. P13 emphasised, "it is very important for English to set people free and to let people express their own and international cultures." Others highlighted the uniqueness of their own speech: "I have a specific type of accent, melody, tempo and tone … including when I speak in English" (P1). This openness to variation was seen as essential for supporting inclusive classrooms.

Finally, participants reflected on how ELF had contributed to their personal and professional growth. For some, learning English began as a personal passion—P21 recalled learning English through music as a teenager—while others described how ELF had shaped their careers. P3 noted: "discovering ELF allowed me to understand what place English had in my career, in my daily life, and the place of English as a teacher." Several participants also discussed the challenge of adapting their evolving understanding of ELF into classroom practice. P1 explained: "for me ELF is more relevant at the spoken level … being properly understood speaking is harder than in writing."

As participants reevaluated their perception of effective ELF communication in English, their own posts and comments at times bore signs of the innovative, unconventional English usage associated with ELF utterances. Thus, one participant's "fear of making some *abnormous* mistakes" (P11) [authors' emphasis] conveyed meaning with particular poignancy. Idiomatic language and humour were both deployed to show empathy, express solidarity and participate in a community: "all we can do is dive into the ELF and hope our students … show mercy", P11 joked, with the inclusive pronouns "we" and "our" continuously expressing collectivity.

At times multimodal aspects such as emoticons and memes were deployed to alleviate common anxieties and negative emotions surrounding EMI teaching and help participants project their own professional learning into their future classrooms: "The meme is perfect! Great! I'm thinking to show this during the introduction lecture" (P19) declared.

4.2.3. Umbrella theme 3: Implications for teaching and learning

Participants' reflections on teaching and learning through the lens of ELF clustered around three interrelated areas: the challenges of teaching in English, the pedagogical affordances of ELF, and the need to adapt teaching, feedback, and assessment practices.

Many participants described the cognitive demands of teaching in a language that is not their own. While the ELF perspective offered some relief from native-speaker expectations, it did not eliminate the effort required to create inclusive, comprehensible learning environments, and explain concepts effectively. As P13 noted, "sometimes this obsession [with being correct] distracts me from the real goal of my lesson, which is the students' understanding and acquisition of skills." Participants' reflections were thus directed back into the classroom and the student experience.

Participants found that engaging with ELF fostered a more relaxed, non-judgmental teaching environment and encouraged a shift in focus from linguistic accuracy to communicative effectiveness. ELF was seen as a tool for enriching classroom communication, as P3 observed: "ELF is the opportunity to discover a great diversity of exchanges, origins, and accents." Other participants highlighted how ELF opened space for more innovative, multimodal teaching strategies. As P26 observed, "ELF is really open to innovative teaching techniques … to improve verbal comprehension in a proactive and interactive extra-verbal way." Through dialogic reflection, they began to focus on students' needs, new content presentation strategies and pedagogy, putting aside excessive concern about their own language.

ELF came to be seen as a tool for pedagogical flexibility, helping educators adapt to diverse student needs and focus on communication with regard to attainment of intended learning outcomes and assessment. As P15 explained, "understanding that communicative effectiveness in spoken communication is not directly linked to proficiency is a key factor in assessing both the effectiveness of my teaching and the learning outcomes of my students." Participants described strategies such as adding text to slides, using subtitles in videos, and forming diverse student groups in class to support comprehension and raise ELF awareness. Assessment is challenging in any context, and more so in EMI. Participants noted that distinguishing between communicative ability and actual learning achievement is not trivial. P15 asked: "a student with a good level of English … has an advantage. How can we manage this?" Likewise, P10 questioned whether students' answers in tests and their ability to demonstrate their competence are compromised by their use of English. They then pushed the issue further by wondering if assessment might "be biased by the teachers' language skills?" (P10).

5. Discussion and conclusion

While Section 4 integrated results with interpretive commentary, this section moves beyond the forum-level analysis to synthesize recurring themes and explore their broader theoretical and practical implications for EMI professional development. Specifically, we examine four interrelated areas: how ELF facilitated the building of an online community of practice (5.1), participants' critical engagement with language ideologies and systemic inequalities (5.2), the emotional and professional growth experienced (5.3), and actionable implications for designing inclusive online EMI professional development (5.4).

5.1. Building community through ELF

Participants' engagement with ELF extended beyond linguistic adaptation to the co-construction of a professional learning community. The forum functioned as a dynamic Community of Practice (CoP) (Wenger, 1998), where peer reflection and shared challenges created psychological safety and encouraged collegiality (Konttinen, 2022). In the forum, participants not only reflected on ELF, but also used ELF to enact community. The discussion became increasingly confident and confidential in tone. Self-deprecation, jokes, and referring to a post as a "confession" helped build rapport and a sense of belonging. Interactional features such as humour, rhetorical questions, idiomatic language, and multimodal resources (emoticons, memes) were not merely stylistic choices but acts of community-building (Lin & Kaur, 2024; Pullin, 2017). These practices resonate with ELF research that highlights creativity and relational strategies in intercultural communication (Pitzl, 2017; Ranta, 2006). An original use of idioms, particularly metaphorical idioms (Pitzl, 2017) is considered a key characteristic of ELF. In the forum groups, they were used to describe the value of being part of a CoP and of sharing experience. "We are all in the same boat", "no man is an island" (channeling John Donne). ELF was conceived of as "glue" (P16) that binds participants, from diverse disciplines, institutions and countries, in a common experience.

Community was also enacted through terms of address such as "my partner" and expressions of affection: "Dear P14. I absolutely agree!". Greetings like "Good Day!" at the start of a post suggest a multilingual ELF in which participants draw on a range of linguistic resources to express camaraderie (Cogo, 2018). They give encouragement and learn from each other: "Your approach to try to explain things in different ways to overcome possible language limitations is essential! Well done!" (P22). By deploying inclusive pronouns, informal greetings, and playful metaphors participants enacted solidarity and reduced the emotional labour of EMI teaching. This illustrates how ELF-aware spaces can catalyse rapport and collaborative meaning-making in digital environments (Baker &

Sangiamchit, 2019; Kalocsai, 2014; Sperti, 2024). As Wimpenny et al. (2022) argue, such digital environments can thus offer an equitable digital *third space* (Bhabha, 1994) in which participants exchange "intellectual, emotional, and socio-cultural positionings" (p. 30).

5.2. Language ideologies and inequality

While ELF was largely experienced as liberating, participants critically interrogated its involvement in global power structures. Several reflections underscored that English, even in its lingua franca form, remains embedded in Anglocentric systems that privilege certain varieties and perpetuate epistemic inequalities (Cogo et al., 2024; Zeng et al., 2023). Access to English education was described as stratified along socioeconomic lines, reinforcing elite status and marginalising alternative epistemologies (Ramachandran & Rauh, 2023). These insights echo critiques of linguistic neo-imperialism and the risks of monolingual ideologies in EMI (Kuteeva, 2023; Zheng & Qiu, 2023). Participants' concerns about fairness in assessment and academic publishing further highlight how language proficiency operates as a gatekeeper to opportunity. Positioning ELF as a tool for equity thus requires critical awareness and institutional support, aligning with calls for glocal approaches that balance global norms with local realities (Selvi & Rudolph, 2018; Wimpenny et al., 2024).

5.3. Emotional and professional growth

The emotional dimension of EMI teaching really stood out in this module. Participants described initial feelings of anxiety and inadequacy rooted in native-speaker ideologies (Baker, 2015; Hua, 2016), which gradually shifted toward confidence and pedagogical flexibility. This trajectory reflects Mezirow's transformative learning theory (1991, 2000), where critical reflection and dialogic engagement enable perspective change. Exposure to ELF principles allowed educators to begin to reframe deficit-based self-perceptions, prioritizing intelligibility and communicative effectiveness over linguistic perfection (Jenkins, 2014; Sifakis & Bayyurt, 2017). This reorientation was not only cognitive but affective, fostering resilience and renewed professional identity. Such shifts in mindset could, over time, become transformative. Participants also experimented with multimodal strategies and collaborative assessment practices, signalling a move toward inclusive, context-sensitive pedagogy (Mauranen, 2023; Mair et al., 2025). Emotional release and peer empathy within the CoP amplified this growth, underscoring the interplay between identity negotiation and pedagogical innovation. As in Sperti's (2024) study, the ELF module forum registered a high level of emotional engagement and participants appeared especially cooperative.

5.4. Implications for professional development

Findings offer actionable insights for designing COIL-based EMI professional development. Firstly, facilitator presence can model inclusive communicative practices and sustain engagement in forum discussions (Mair, 2025; Teräs, 2016). The least active discussion group in this study had little input from facilitators. Secondly, interactional scaffolding, such as prompts encouraging empathy, humour and reflection, can deepen learning and foster psychological safety (Lin & Kaur, 2024). Likewise, the integration of multimodal tools (emojis, memes, collaborative documents) can support mediation strategies (Bosso, 2020). The LMS used for this course only offered likes, but participants could share audio or use emoticons and memes in their own posts. As far as content is concerned, embedding critical ELF awareness in the course helps educators interrogate language ideologies and power dynamics (Guarda & Helm, 2017; Cogo et al., 2024). With the use of AI tools in future editions, this may need to include reflections on the implications of technology for linguistic diversity (Guido, 2025). Finally, assessment of student learning was a recurring concern with regards to both linguistic inequality that students face and to adjusting assessment practices through ELF. Raising awareness of the role of language in EMI assessment and offering strategies to improve assessment design would be useful. Such insights position COIL as an effective space for inclusive, dialogic professional learning in global higher education.

5.5. Limitations and future research

This study has several limitations. The sample was limited to participants and facilitators of a single COIL course, and the analysis focused on one discussion forum out of six. As such, the findings may not fully capture the diversity of perspectives across the entire course or be generalisable to other EMI contexts. Additionally, the dual role of researchers as facilitators, while offering rich insights, may have introduced interpretive bias, although this was mitigated through collaborative analysis and reflexivity.

Future research could expand the scope by including multiple modules, longitudinal follow-up with participants to understand the impact of the project, or comparative studies across different COIL programmes. For professional learning to be transformative, its benefits should be lasting. Further exploration of how ELF-aware practices are implemented in participants' classrooms — and how students experience these changes — would therefore also be valuable. Finally, more research is needed on how digital tools and AI-mediated communication are reshaping ELF interactions in EMI settings.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Olivia Mair: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Validation, Methodology, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Amani Eltayb:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Validation, Methodology, Formal analysis,

Data curation, Conceptualization. **Diego Hernan Giunta:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Visualization, Validation, Methodology, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Magnus Gustafsson:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Validation, Methodology, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Jennifer Valcke:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Visualization, Validation, Methodology, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this article.

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