Motivating Learners by Meeting their Needs: The Introduction of a Business English Track at the unibz Language Centre

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Abstract

One of the greatest challenges faced by university language centers in Italy is finding ways to motivate students to complete extracurricular language courses offered to help them meet their language proficiency requirements for graduation. It was hypothesized that the root of the problem was that the existing course offerings focus too narrowly on the most urgent need of meeting language requirements, and that one solution might be to shift from the teaching of languages for general purposes to the teaching of languages for specific purposes. This chapter examines this approach from the perspective of the widely recognized, but seldom empirically studied, link between ESP and motivation vis-à-vis the satisfaction of learner needs. After an analysis of some of the unfulfilled needs of students at the trilingual Free University of Bozen-Bolzano, the present paper relies upon both qualitative and quantitative data to report the impact of a pilot Business English track of courses which has been introduced in order to increase student participation and sustain their motivation by meeting four specific needs: 1) their need for Business English in order to gain a competitive advantage in an internationalized labor market; 2) their dual need to pass an internationally recognized English language exam in order certify their English proficiency and demonstrate to employers their specific skills in Business English; 3) their need for blended and distance learning options as well as negotiable assignment submission deadlines in order to grant them the flexibility, agency, and autonomy their active lives as students demand; 4) their need for continuous assessment in order to provide the feedback, support, and structure they need to complete such a course.

1.   Introduction

The present paper is based on four underlying assumptions. The first is that the most important factor in language teaching and learning is learner motivation (see Gardner & Lambert, 1972; Gardner, 2010). The second assumption is that while motivation is commonly understood as a mental state, motivation is in fact a dynamic process which is impacted by both internal and external factors (see Dörnyei & Skehan, 2003; Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2013). Third, it is my personal belief that the best way for a teacher to increase the motivation of learners is by (convincing them you are) meeting their needs. Finally, the best way for a teacher to meet the needs of learners is by granting them (a degree of) agency in the learning process and fostering the development of learner autonomy (Holec, 1979).

If all these assumptions hold true, then it follows that all language teaching should concentrate on meeting students' needs especially by granting agency and fostering autonomy. If English for specific purposes (ESP) can be defined as any English language teaching (ELT) context in which learners have a specific set of common needs (Dudley-Evans & St. John, 1998; Hutchinson & Waters, 1987), then the logical conclusion is that ESP done right should be very motivating. The implicit aim of the case study described in this paper was to test this hypothesis.

2.   Five Challenges Teaching and Learning Languages at a Trilingual University

The Free University of Bozen-Bolzano (unibz) is a trilingual university, where German, Italian, and English all serve as official languages of instruction. In an effort to realize this language policy, students are required to certify B2 in their L1 and B2 in their L2 in order to enroll, and they must certify C1 in their L1, C1 in their L2, and B2 in their L3 in order to graduate.[1] This institutional language policy attracts highly motivated multilingual students. Still, the Language Centre at unibz faces five major challenges promoting trilingualism and aiding students in meeting their language requirements.

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1   An overview of the language requirements can be found here: https://www.unibz.it/assets/Documents/Languages/Language-Requirements-unibz-18-02-2019-EN.pdf

First, many unibz students (and other members of the university community) have false expectations with respect to the amount of effort required to achieve intermediate and advanced proficiency in an L2. A popular myth prevalent, particularly among first-year students at unibz, is that merely "studying tri-lingually" results in advanced proficiency in all three languages. The reality, which most students learn the hard way, is that the progression from one CEFR level to the next requires approximately 200 hours of guided language instruc-tion (CUP, 2013). Given that many students enroll with very limited proficiency in their L3, this implies a deficit of as much as 800 instructional hours in the L3 alone—whereas the Language Centre offers a maximum of 560 hours per language. The unwritten expectation is that 560 hours of instruction will suf-fice for students who take full advantage of their opportunities for language exposure.

A second challenge is that Italian university students are decidedly busy. The Bologna Process has established three-year bachelor's degrees, which are more focused, which are geared toward real-world application (i.e., employment), which are recognized throughout the European Union, and which require signi-ficantly less time on average to complete (e.g., Lerche, 2016). However, completing 180 credit hours (i.e., 5,400 learning hours), including internships, study abroad, senior theses, etc., excluding any extracurricular activities, all within three years, leaves little time for anything else. In addition, many contemporary Italian uni-versity students work, have families, commute, and/or study via distance. The result is that very few have time, energy, or desire to engage in 800-plus hours of formal and informal language learning during their studies.

Another challenge we face at the Language Centre is that the language courses we offer are optional and "non-academic." We offer free courses from A0 to C1 to help students meet their language requirements and other langua-ge learning needs. But these courses are "extracurricular" and award no aca-demic credit. When a student is forced to choose between attending a language course or completing a degree requirement which awards credit, that choice is easy for most. As a result, many students procrastinate when it comes to lan-guage learning, and do not put forth full effort toward meeting the language requirements until they are approaching their desired date of graduation. This is particularly true for the second language, which for the majority of unibz students is English.

The fourth challenge is that a combination of the Bologna Process and the extent to which the CEFR has been adopted in Italian higher education has led to language certification becoming more important than language teaching and learning. The CEFR has standardized language teaching and assessment across Europe (and, slowly, the world). Like most language centers in Italy, unibz has embraced this trend. Our in-house language proficiency exams—introduced in 2017-18—are aligned to the CEFR,[2] and we offer free language proficiency exams and free preparation courses for international certificates (e.g., CAE, CPE, BEC, IELTS Academic). Thus, when our students meet their language requirements they are often meeting the requirements of most other public and private institutions, as well. Language certification offers a distinct competitive advantage in the labor market. But for our students, these tests are high stakes and their importance often creates *negative washback*: Students are under constant pressure to "pass the exam" and teachers are under constant pressure to "teach to the test." The observed outcome of over-emphasizing testing and de-emphasizing learning is that most students repeatedly attempt exams until they pass, without regularly engaging in formal learning.

In sum, unibz truly values the importance of being and becoming multilingual at an institutional level, but in praxis, at the instructional level, meeting the requirements necessitates significantly more effort than many students (and many professors and administrators) initially expect and most students lack the time and/or the motivation to sustain the necessary effort. As a result, most students procrastinate when it comes to language learning, most students fail exams on multiple occasions, and many students delay graduation as a result. These challenges are exacerbated by the negative washback caused by high stakes testing. Out of a sense of urgency, our response is to become stricter in our policies: We at the Language Centre often choose to offer fewer courses, expecting dropouts; we require 75% face-to-face attendance and 60% scores on an end-of-course test (EOCT, i.e., summative/medium-stakes assessment) to pass to the next module; and we regularly discuss additional restrictions and requirements, such as restrictions on the number of exam attempts and enrollment or dropout fees for courses. The fifth challenge we face is therefore our

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2   An overview of the structure and content of the exams can be found here: https://www.unibz.it/assets/Documents/Languages/2019-02-21-unibz-language-exam-structure-B2-C1-EN-Cand-2019-20-blue.pdf

own, arguably, strict and inflexible policies, which risk ignoring student needs and inhibiting their agency and autonomy.

Figure 1 below presents enrollment, attendance, and course completion data for all C1 English courses offered on the Bozen-Bolzano campus during the first semester of 2014-15 as a quantification of the net effect of these challenges. Notwithstanding our trilingual language policy, most of these challenges and the resulting impact on course enrollment and completion are paradigmatic of language instruction across Italian higher education (see Ennis, 2015, 2018).
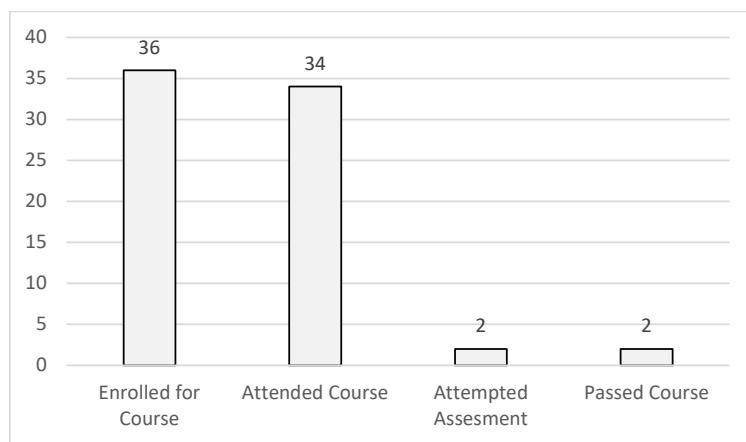

Figure 1 – Course enrollment, attendance, and completion data for all first-semester extensive C1.1 English courses (Bozen-Bolzano campus, 2014–15) ("attended course" = attended at least one lesson)

3. A New Organizational Structure and a Modularized Language Curriculum

Recognizing that the status quo was untenable, the language curriculum and the organizational structure of the Language Centre were restructured prior to the 2015-16 academic year. A new modular course system with three learning paths for the third language was introduced (Zanin, 2015).[3] The new curriculum alternates between intensive and extensive courses, whereby 80 and 120-

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3   An overview of the new language curriculum can be found here: https://www.unibz.it/assets/Documents/Languages/Language-Paths-19.01.2018.pdf

hour intensive courses are offered before (i.e., in September), between (i.e., in February), and after (i.e., in July) the semesters, and 40-hour extensive courses are offered during the semester.

In addition, four new offices were created at the Language Centre, one for each language of instruction (English, German, and Italian), and one for language testing and certification. The initial aim of these offices was to offer support to language teachers and to administrate the respective language curricula. In 2016-17 a new full-time "language coordinator" position was created for each of the three languages. The role of the language coordinator is to coordinate the respective teams of teachers and monitor the respective curricula, which implies the authority to make curriculum decisions and advise the director of the Language Centre on official policies. One of the first proposals I made during my first year as the coordinator for the English language was to cap the student-to-teacher ratio for English courses at twenty-to-one. Figure 2 displays the appreciable effect which these new policies had on course attendance and completion for C1 English courses offered during the first semester of the 2015-16 and 2016-17 academic years. Figure 3 shows the same data for the first offering of C1 intensive English courses in February of 2016-17 as a baseline for those courses.
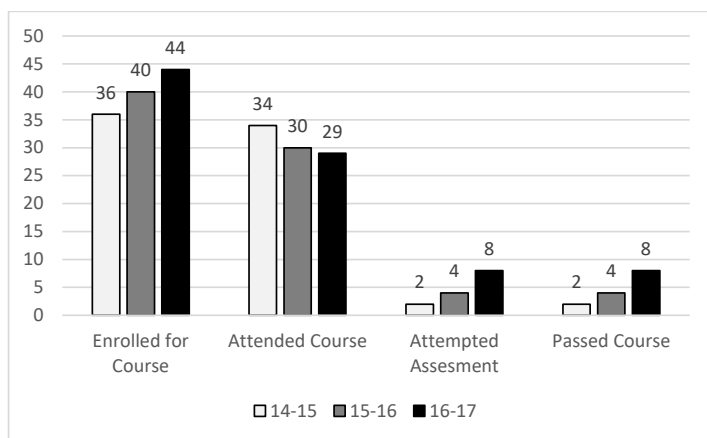

Figure 2 – The effect of new modular curriculum and new organizational structure on course attendance and completion for all first-semester extensive C1.1 English courses (Bozen-Bolzano campus) ("attended course" = attended at least one lesson)
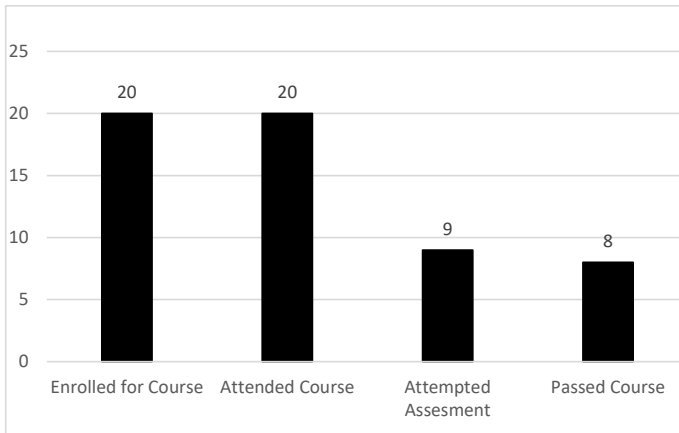
Figure 3 – Course enrollment, attendance, and completion data for all February C1.1/C1.2 intensive English courses (Bozen-Bolzano campus, first offering in 2016-17) ("attended course" = attended at least one lesson)

4.   Motivating Students by Meeting their Needs

While these initial results were promising, they were by no means satisfactory. In fact, it had been previously determined that we would need to experiment with additional interventions over the subsequent academic years. In consideration of the five central challenges, we recognized that our students have four broad needs:

1) as students at a trilingual university, they need to improve all four macro skills (reading, listening, writing, speaking);
2) as adult learners they require structured instruction and regular feedback (i.e., continuous and formative assessment);
3) as contemporary university students they must develop autonomy and be given flexibility (i.e., they must develop learning strategies and be granted agency);
4) as global citizens they require English both during their studies and after graduation.

More specifically, during the 2017-18 academic year, the Language Centre instituted a new course assessment policy that would assess all four skills and emphasize the role of continuous assessment, while during the 2018-2019 academic year, I experimented with a blended-learning business English course which would serve as an alternative to the general English C1 courses. The aim of both interventions was to experiment with a more student-centered approach which emphasized teaching and learning over testing in the hope that student engagement in the language courses—as measured by course attendance and completion—might improve.

4.1   New Policy 1: A New Assessment Policy

Prior to the 2017-18 academic year, the language proficiency exams offered by the Language Centre were outsourced to partner universities and assessed receptive skills (i.e., reading and listening) and lexicogrammar, with the exception of B2+ and C1 exams, which also included an internally developed speaking exam beginning in 2015-16. Since 2017-18, however, all exams have been produced internally and exams at all levels (B1, B2, and C1) have also assessed productive skills (i.e., speaking and writing). This change was made due to concerns that many students had been graduating from unibz with writing skills which were below their certified exit levels.

Before the implementation of the new in-house exams, students who enrolled in a modular language course were required to earn a minimum score of 60% on an end-of-course test (EOCT) and attend a minimum of 75% of the instructional hours to pass to the next level in the modular curriculum. The EOCTs—which were conceived as summative, achievement tests—were modeled after the proficiency exams in that they consisted of a listening item, a reading item, and a lexicogrammar item. In an attempt to better align course assessment with proficiency assessment, and in order to inhibit negative washback and reemphasize the importance of teaching and learning, a new course assessment policy was introduced in the autumn of 2017-18.

According to the new assessment policy, all courses must now teach and assess all four skills and all courses must employ forms of continuous assessment, in addition to an EOCT. For English courses, students must compose 2-3 written genre (20% of the final mark), must produce one monologue and engage

in one dialogue (20% of the final mark), and must complete an EOCT consisting of a listening part (20%), a reading part (20%), and a language in use part (10-20%), whereby up to 10% of the language in use paper may be substituted with regular quizzes administered throughout the course. Furthermore, teachers are encouraged to reinforce the formative function of course assessment by simply awarding marks for learning activities and offering similar feedback on informally assessed work. As demonstrated in the sample course assessment procedure for a hypothetical C1 English course in Figure 4 below, as much as 50% of the final mark can now be earned simply by completing graded learning activities. Although this "new" assessment policy may be established practice in English language teaching in other countries, graded continuous assessment is not commonplace in university language instruction in Italy (see Ennis, 2018).

Assessment Procedure

Unit Quizzes (10%)
There will be a timed online quiz after the completion of each unit. The quizzes will focus on the language, grammar, and communication skills covered in each unit.

Writing (20%)
Students will be required to complete three graded writing tasks during the course: 1) a cover letter, 2) a business proposal, 3) an essay. These tasks will be completed at home and submitted online.

Speaking (20%)
Students will work in pairs to prepare a formal oral presentation which will be given in class. Students must be prepared to answer questions about the content of their presentation.

End-of-Course Test (50%)
There will be a timed online exam during the final lesson. The exam will focus on the language, grammar, and communication skills covered during the course. Distance learners may complete the exam remotely online during the lesson, with the same start and end time.

Course Completion
There is no attendance requirement for this course. Students must submit at least 75% of the coursework and earn a minimum score of 60% to pass the course.

Figure 4 – Sample assessment procedure

Figure 5 depicts the impact this new policy had on course attendance and completion for C1 English courses offered during the first semester of the 2017-18 academic year, whereas Figure 6 depicts the same as a percentage of the total number of students enrolled. Figures 7 and 8 then present the same data for the February intensive C1 English courses during the same academic year.
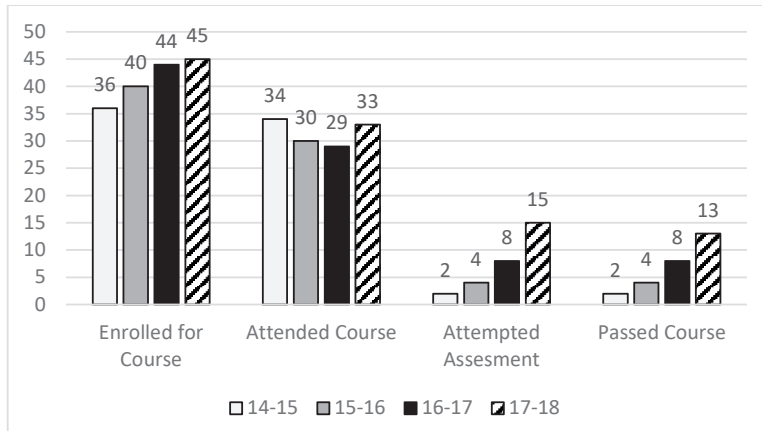
Figure 5 – The effect of the new assessment policy on course attendance and completion for all first-semester extensive C1.1 English courses (Bozen-Bolzano campus) ("attended course" = attended at least one lesson)
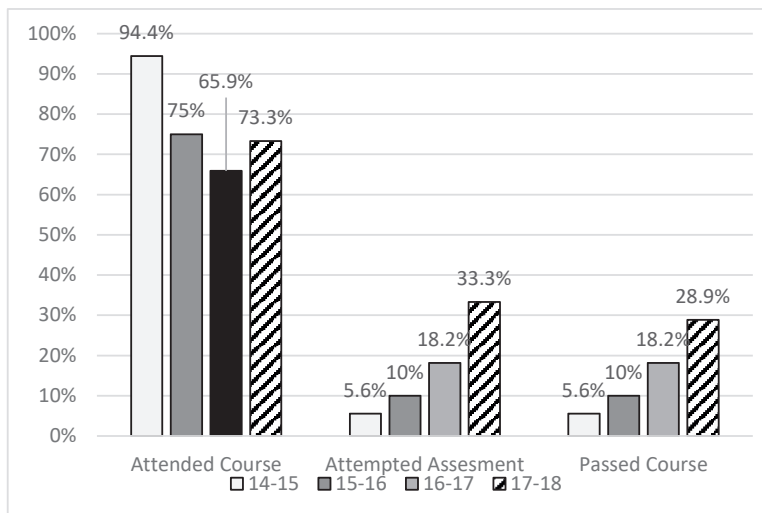
Figure 6 – The effect of the new assessment policy on course attendance and completion for all first-semester extensive C1.1 English courses as a percentage of total enrollment (Bozen-Bolzano campus) ("attended course" = attended at least one lesson; "attempted assessment" = attempted EOCT)
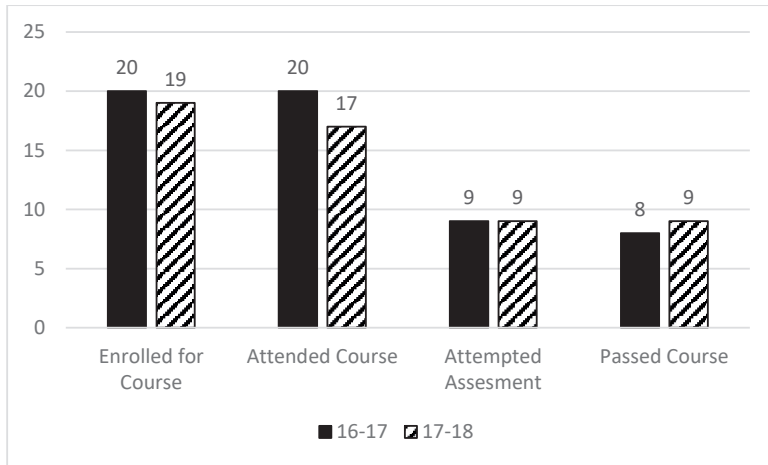
Figure 7 – The effect of the new assessment policy on course attendance and completion for all February C1.1/C1.2 intensive English courses (Bozen-Bolzano campus) ("attended course" = attended at least one lesson)
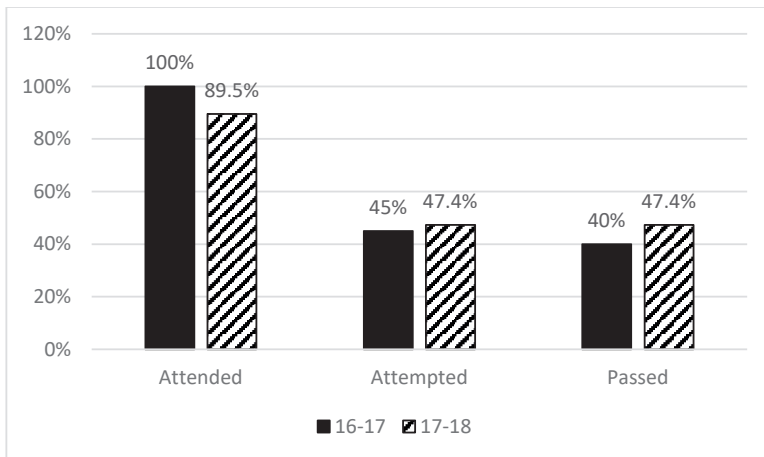

Figure 8 – The effect of the new assessment policy on course attendance and completion for all February C1.1/C1.2 intensive English courses as a percentage of total enrollment (Bozen-Bolzano campus) ("attended course" = attended at least one lesson; "attempted assessment" = attempted EOCT)

The new assessment policy appears to have further contributed to the positive effect on the proportion of enrolled students who attempted the EOCT and the proportion who passed the course during the first-semester extensive courses.[4] The fact that a similar effect was not observed during the February intensive courses may be attributable to the divergent motivations and learning modalities of an intensive course. The February intensive courses meet for eight hours per day for two weeks, and anecdotal evidence suggest that many students choose these courses over an extensive course due to this compact time commitment. Maintaining students' motivation across the 80 hours poses its own challenges, but it makes sense that such an intervention would have a more noticeable effect over ten weeks than over two weeks.

Informal feedback from the teachers who taught both sets of courses indicated that students attended and participated more regularly in comparison to the previous years and that both students and teachers were more satisfied with the experience overall.

4.2 New Policy 2: A Blended-Learning Business English Track of Courses

The second new policy under investigation here only pertained to English courses. Language courses offered by the unibz Language Centre still require 75% attendance and a 60% cumulative mark in order to pass to the next module. In addition, the language courses teach general language, albeit with a focus on thematic content and spoken and written genre that are appropriate for university students. During the 2017-18 academic year, I decided to experiment with a more flexible yet more "specialized" option for advanced learners. Specifically, the Language Centre offered two C1 Business English courses. These were part of a parallel track of C1.1 and C1.2 courses which would grant participants access to the BEC Higher (see footnote 3) exam and a preparation course for that exam.

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4   While the sample sizes were too small to find statistical significance comparing pairs of years with a z-test, a chi-square test comparing the exam attempt rates ($X^2(3, N = 165) = 12.90$, $p = .005$) and pass rates ($X^2(3, N = 165) = 9.52$, $p = .023$) across all four years displayed in the graph indicate that the differences across years were statistically significant. Furthermore, linear regression of the trend line across the four academic years, conducted post-hoc, found that the average annual increase in the exam attempt rate of 9.20% ($p = .033$) and the average increase in the pass rate of 7.81% ($p = .016$) across the years were significant. These findings suggest that the series of interventions have cumulatively improved the situation.

The courses were explicitly advertised as alternatives that would provide participants a competitive advantage in the labor market and certain graduate school applications upon graduation. As ESP courses, the syllabi[5] included domain-specific language, communication skills, and written and spoken genre for both business and business studies. Furthermore, the track was conceptualized as a blended-learning track with a fully distance-learning option. The C1.1 module was a ten-week extensive course that offered 30 hours of face-to-face instruction and 20 hours of online and offline homework, while the C1.2 module was offered as a two-week February intensive course with 30 hours of face-to-face instruction (three hours per day over two weeks) and 30[6] hours of online and offline homework.

For both courses, unibz's adaptation of Moodle was adopted as the blended-learning platform. But it is important to stress that Moodle was employed as an extension of the classroom, rather than as a replacement for face-to-face learning or an online repository for extra materials or extra practice (Marsh, 2012; Tomlinson & Whittaker, 2013), whereby the teaching methodology embraced elements of flipped learning (Gruba, Hinkelman, & Cárdenas-Claros, 2016). Adopting the new assessment policy (Figure 4 was in fact the assessment policy for the C1.1 Business English course), all marked assignments, including collaborative assignments, were completed at home and submitted and marked online, while class time was allocated for completing the communicative tasks in the assigned course book (Baade, Holloway, & Scrivener, 2009). Most importantly, the distance learning option necessitated dropping the physical attendance requirement for course completion: Instead of requiring students to attend 75% of the instructional hours, they were required to complete 75% of the course work. Yet they were still required to earn a minimum total score of 60% to pass.

Figures 9 and 10 present the impact these two "tweaks" had on course attendance and completion during the first semester extensive course session, while Figures 11 and 12 present the same during the February intensive course session. The first noteworthy result is that the introduction of the Business English modules appears to have had no effect on enrollments for the general English modules. In fact, the introduction of the ESP course in both cases seems

5   The complete syllabi can be found here: https://tinyurl.com/y2x6vnul

6   The total hours of online and offline homework was increased from 20 to 30 after observing that students had required more than 20 hours for homework during the C1.1 offering.

to have merely increased the total number of students who completed a C1-level course. Second, the Business English modules had higher exam attempt and course completion rates than the general English modules during both the extensive and the intensive course session.[7] Combining these two outcomes may suggest that the students who enrolled for the Business English courses had divergent motivations with regard to course modality and that the combination of the ESP content and the flexibility afforded by the Business English courses was more effective at sustaining their engagement. It should also be noted that controlling for "no shows"—that is students who enroll for a course but never show up, a phenomenon that is largely out of the control of the Language Centre or the instructors under current policy—accentuates these positive results, as indicated in Figures 13 and 14.[8]
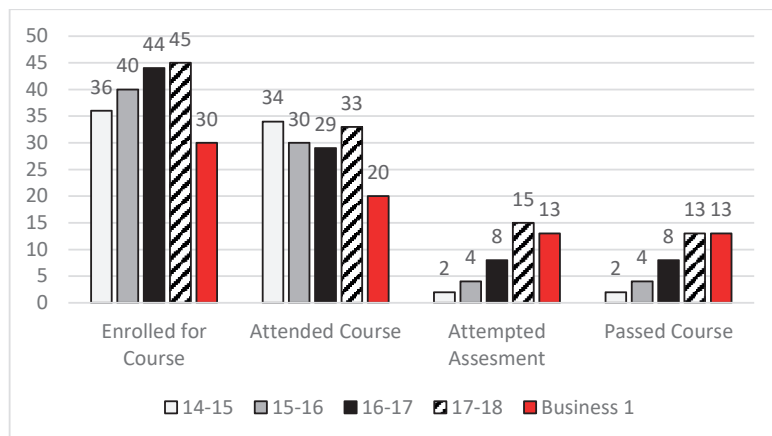

Figure 9 – The effect of the new blended C1.1 Business English module on course attendance and completion compared with all first-semester extensive C1.1 English courses (Bozen-Bolzano campus) ("attended course" = attended at least one lesson)

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7   Again, the sample sizes were too small to make year-over-year comparisons for extensive sessions, but the differences across interventions (X^2(4, N = 195) = 21.0, $p < .001$) remained significant and linear regression found that the upward trend in the exam attempt rate (average increase of 9.9%, $p = .002$) and course pass rate (9.4%, $p = .003$) were sustained by the introduction of a business English module. The substantial increase in course completion connected with the intensive Business English course was not found to be statistically significant, likely due to the small sample size.

8   Controlling for no-shows, across the extensive courses, the differences in the exam attempt rate (X^2(4, N = 146) = 29.5, $p < .001$) and the course pass rate (X^2(4, N = 146) = 27.5, $p < .001$) remain statistically significant, as does the steeper average increase of 15.0% across intervention ($p = .014$). But the differences and slope for the intensive courses remain non-significant.
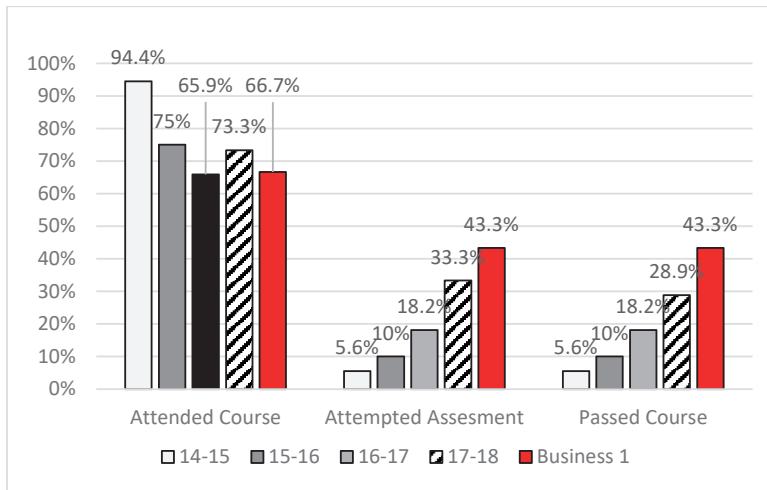
Figure 10 – The effect of the new blended C1.1 Business English module on course attendance and completion compared with all first-semester extensive C1.1 English courses as a percentage of total enrollment (Bozen-Bolzano campus) ("attended course" = attended at least one lesson; "attempted assessment" = attempted EOCT)
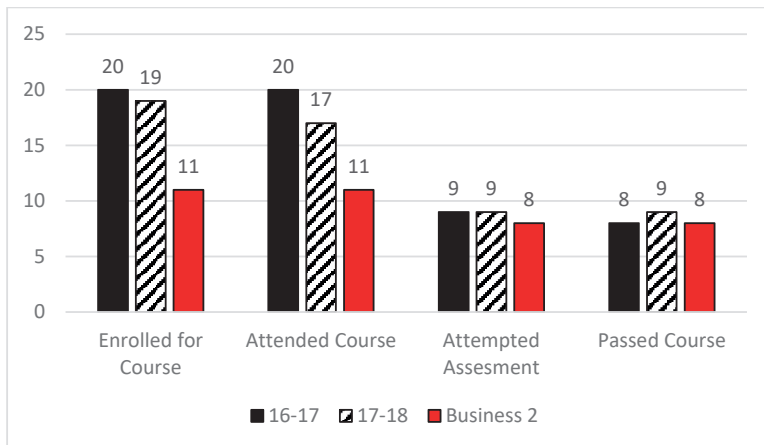

Figure 11 – The effect of the new blended C1.2 Business English module on course attendance and completion compared with all February C1.1/C1.2 intensive English courses (Bozen-Bolzano campus) ("attended course" = attended at least one lesson)
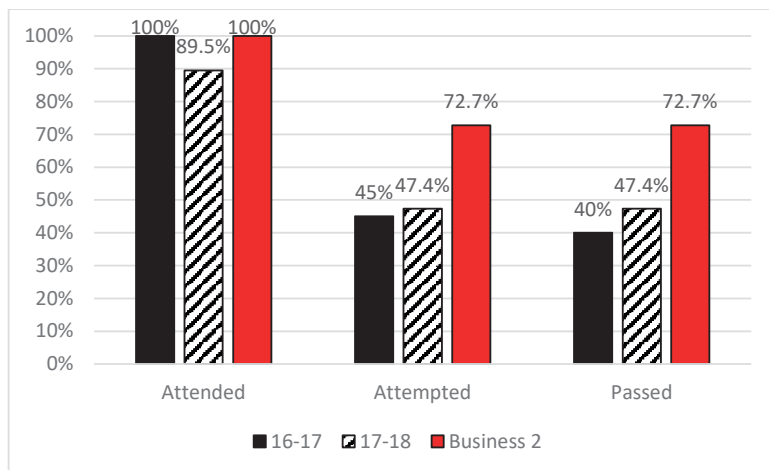
Figure 12 – The effect of the new blended C1.2 Business English module on course attendance and completion compared with all February C1.1/C1.2 intensive English courses as a percentage of total enrollment (Bozen-Bolzano campus) ("attended course" = attended at least one lesson; "attempted assessment" = attempted EOCT)
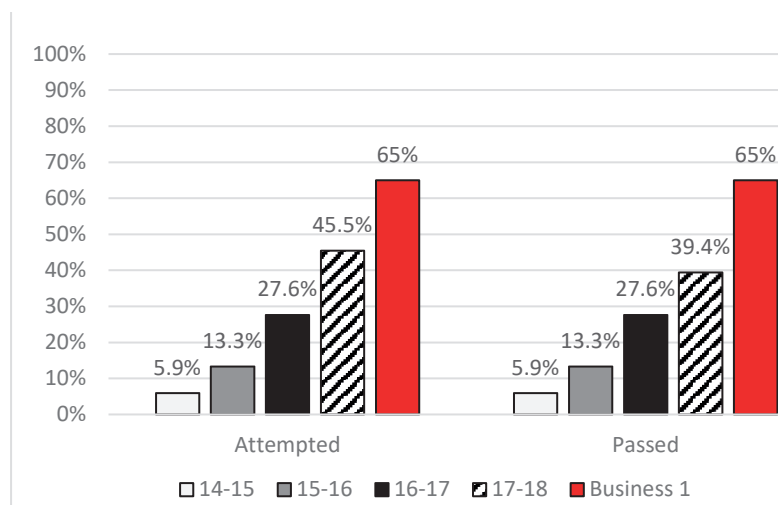

Figure 13 – The effect of the new blended C1.1 Business English module on course attendance and completion compared with all first-semester extensive C1.1 English courses as a percentage of total attendees (Bozen-Bolzano campus) ("attended course" = attended at least one lesson; "attempted assessment" = attempted EOCT)
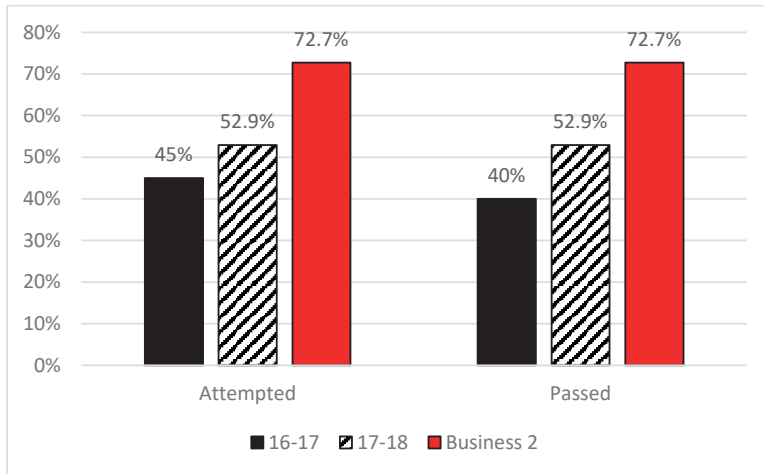
Figure 14 – The effect of the new blended C1.2 Business English module on course attendance and completion compared with all February C1.1/C1.2 intensive English courses as a percentage of total enrollment (Bozen-Bolzano campus) ("attended course" = attended at least one lesson; "attempted assessment" = attempted EOCT)

4.3   Student Feedback

Prior to administering the EOCT during both modules of the Business English course, all students who were on track to finish the course were invited to complete a survey consisting of a series of Likert-scale, multiple-choice, and open response items. The aim of the survey was to solicit the students' evaluation of the effectiveness of the course and their attitudes toward the "experimental" elements, including the role of continuous assessment, the blended-learning modality, and the Business English content. In this context it seems most appropriate to focus the analysis on their attitudes toward the interventions.

Attitudes toward the blended-learning model were quite positive across both the C1.1 extensive course and the C2.2 intensive course, with the exception that (some of) the students in the intensive course expressed less satisfaction with the user-friendliness and effectiveness of the Moodle platform (see Table 1). Both groups also greatly appreciated the face-to-face learning and online homework, though fewer students in the extensive course appreciated the homework assigned from the course book (see Table 2), and the majority

of students in both courses expressed a preference for blended learning over purely face-to-face or purely self-directed learning (see Table 3). Regarding assessment policies, both groups also overwhelmingly preferred a mixture of continuous and summative assessment over only one or the other (see Table 4).

In response to the open response question "What did you like best about the course?", students mentioned five broad themes: the flexibility of the course, the continuous assessment, the opportunities for oral interaction, the course structure/organization, and the course's focus on business English. There were, however, some notable differences between the groups. Whereas the extensive course group noted their satisfaction with the flexibility of the course with a higher frequency, the intensive course group noted their appreciation of the structure/organization and the business English content (see Table 5). Regarding their motivations for enrolling in the course, both groups emphasized their interest in business English and their desire to improve and/or certify their business English proficiency in order to be more competitive in the labor market after graduation over their immediate need to meet the unibz language requirements.

Table 1 – Median Likert-Scale Responses Regarding Blended-Learning Model

	Responses C1.1 ($N = 12$)	Responses C1.2 ($N = 8$)	Mann-Whitney test
I appreciated the flexibility of the course, that is, that attendance was optional and all assignments were negotiable.	*Mdn* = 5.0, range: 4-5	*Mdn* = 5.0, range: 3-5	$U = 39.5$, $p = .32$, $r = 0.22$
I appreciated the blended-learning model (i.e., the division of the course into face-to-face meetings and optional online and offline homework).	*Mdn* = 5.0, range: 3-5	*Mdn* = 4.5, range: 4-5	$U = 34.5$, $p = .24$, $r = 0.26$
I appreciated the distance-learning option (i.e., that face-to-face attendance was optional and that I could complete the course at my own pace on my own).	*Mdn* = 5.0, range: 3-5	*Mdn* = 4.5, range: 4-5	$U = 38.0$, $p = .38$, $r = 0.20$
The online platform (OLE/Moodle) was user-friendly and effective as a learning medium.	*Mdn* = 4.5, range: 3-5	*Mdn* = 3.5, range: 2-5	$U = 30.0$, $p = .15$, $r = 0.33$

Table 2 – Multiple Choice (Select All That Apply) Responses to the Question: "Which Modalities of Learning Did You find Effective and Useful?"

	Responses C1.1	Responses C1.2	*z* Test (Two Tails)
Accessing the material on the online platform and submitting assessment tasks online as homework.	91.7% (*n* = 11)	75.0% (*n* = 6)	$z = -1.02$, $p = .31$, $r = -0.23$
Attending the face-to-face lessons and completing learning tasks in the course book in class.	83.3% (*n* = 10)	87.5% (*n* = 7)	$z = 0.26$, $p = .79$, $r = 0.058$
Completing (certain) learning tasks in the course book as homework.	25% (*n* = 3)	75.0% (*n* = 6)	$z = 2.20$, $p = .029$, $r = 0.49*$
None of the above.	0% (*n* = 0)	0% (*n* = 0)	N/A

* Difference significant at p < 0.05

Table 3 - Multiple Choice (Select One) Responses to the Question: "Which Type of Course Would You Prefer for a Business English Course?"

	Response C1.1	Responses C1.2	Fisher's Exact Test
Face-to-face course	16.7% ($n = 2$)	0% ($n = 0$)	
Online course	8.3% ($n = 1$)	0% ($n = 0$)	
Self-study course	0% ($n = 0$)	0% ($n = 0$)	
Blended-learning course (with all of the above)	75.0% ($n = 9$)	100% ($n = 8$)	$p = .50$

Table 4 – Multiple Choice (Select One) Responses to the Question: "Which Type of Assessment Procedure Would You Prefer for a Business English Course?"

	Response C1.1	Responses C1.2	Chi-Square Test
Only marked assignments during the course	8.3% ($n = 1$)	0% ($n = 0$)	
Only an end-of-course test	0% ($n = 0$)	12.5% ($n = 1$)	$X^2(2, N = 20) = 2.18,$
Both marked assignments and an end-of-course test	91.7% ($n = 11$)	87.5% ($n = 7$)	$p = .34$

Table 5 – Thematic Analysis of Responses to the Open Question: "What Did You Like Best About the Course?"

	Response C1.1	Responses C1.2	z Test (Two Tails)
Flexibility and blended-learning model	66.7% ($n = 8$)	11.3% ($n = 1$)	$z = -2.39, p = .017,$ $r = -0.53$*
Continuous assessment	16.7% ($n = 2$)	11.3% ($n = 1$)	$z = -0.26, p = .79, r = -0.058$
Opportunity for oral interaction during face-to-face lessons	16.7%% ($n = 2$)	0% ($n = 0$)	$z = -1.22, p = .22, r = -0.27$
Course structure/organization	0% ($n = 0$)	37.5% ($n = 3$)	$z = 2.30, p = .021, r = 0.51$*
Focus on Business English	0% ($n = 0$)	25.0% ($n = 2$)	$z = 1.83, p = .067, r = 0.41$**

* Difference significant at p < 0.05   ** Difference significant at p < 0.10

Table 6 – Multiple Choice (Select All That Apply) Responses to the Question: "Why Did You Enroll for this Course?"

	Response C1.1	Responses C1.2	z test (Two Tails)
I would like to gain a competitive advantage in the job market after graduation.	75.0% ($n = 9$)	75.0%% ($n = 6$)	$z = 0.00, p = 1.00, r = 0.00$
I am interested in Business English.	58.3% ($n = 7$)	62.5% ($n = 5$)	$z = 0.19, p = .85, r = 0.042$
I am interested in attempting the BEC Higher exam.	33.3% ($n = 4$)	50.0% ($n = 4$)	$z = 0.75, p = .45, r = 0.17$
I intend to apply for a graduate program in a Business-related field.	25.0% ($n = 3$)	25.5% ($n = 2$)	$z = 0.00, p = 1.00, r = 0.00$
In order to meet my unibz language requirements.	16.7% ($n = 2$)	12.5% ($n = 1$)	$z = -0.26, p = .79, r = -0.058$
I want/need to improve my Business English for my current job.	16.7% ($n = 2$)	12.5% ($n = 1$)	$z = -0.26, p = .79, r = -0.058$
*Other****	8.3% ($n = 1$)	0% ($n = 0$)	$z = -0.84, p = .40, r = -0.19$

***The sole response to this choice indicated "It could be useful also for other courses of my Bachelor [sic.] in Economics."

5. Conclusion

While it is difficult to isolate the effects of each individual intervention due to the small sample sizes of this case study, the series of interventions made by the unibz Language Centre over the past few years have clearly had a positive net effect on student engagement. Thus, several important lessons can be drawn from this case study, most of which are relevant to all contemporary contexts of language teaching and learning.

First, language centers should find ways to emphasize the role of teaching and learning and promote *positive washback* without delegitimizing the importance of testing and certification. We should clearly communicate the challenges of acquiring a new language to prospective and current students. In policy and praxis, we must aim to clearly distinguish language learning from exam preparation and language certification. Course assessment should "test what we teach" rather than "teach to the test" (Lee & VanPatten, 2003) and should be conceptualized as part of learning: often continuous and always with a formative function.

Second, while it is clearly possible to apply blended and flipped methodologies to an intensive language course, perhaps due to the "high intensity" of our model, the Language Centre at unibz might reflect further on using Moodle as the platform for those courses. This is not to suggest that Moodle cannot be used for our intensive courses, rather that we need to consider how the platform is utilized to that end. However, Moodle seems to have been accepted by students attending the extensive courses, at least when the platform is fully integrated into the learning experience.

Finally, the Language Centre—like most other language centers in Italy—needs to re-emphasize a student-centered approach while operating within predefined policies, curricula, and standards. Course design should not be solely based upon pre-defined language policies, curricula, and standards. Instead, we should also consider the students' current and future needs as language learners; we need to afford our students more flexibility, grant them more agency, and foster the development of their learner autonomy. In sum, as practitioners we should strive to return to the fundamentals of student-centered language teaching and learning. This may imply offering more English for specific (and academic) purposes.

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