Innovative ESAP Syllabus Design: A Means to Address English-Language Problems in EMI Programmes

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Abstract

English-language teaching often tends to focus on the product rather than the process (Harmer, 2003; Wette, 2011). This insistence on focusing on the "one size fits all" end product has certainly characterised approaches to syllabus design and the process can either be undervalued or completely disregarded. However, process approaches to syllabus design can actively champion the often-excluded voices of the learners by including them in the decision-making stages of the course. This chapter will present a three-year action research (AR) project whose aim was to modify the advanced English for Specific Academic Purposes (ESAP) syllabus for undergraduate Economics students at the Free University of Bozen-Bolzano, a university located in a predominantly German-speaking area of Italy, where English is used as a medium of instruction (EMI) on an equal footing with Italian and German. The initial design of the ESAP course was based on a needs analysis done by the Faculty but the students had never been consulted during this process, nor had the academic staff using EMI. Consequently, one of the aims of this AR study was to conduct a thorough needs analysis involving these two main stakeholders. The needs were identified using a mixed methods design that analysed quantitative data gathered longitudinally from three cohorts of students, and qualitative data was gathered from the lecturers using EMI. In syllabus design, since "no one approach can be responsive to learners' needs" (Graves, 2008, p. 161), the modified syllabus that evolved from this analysis blended a predominantly process approach to syllabus design with elements of a product approach. This blended approach provided opportunities for the learners' voices to be an intrinsic part of the course by allowing them to negotiate aspects of the syllabus, ranging from the contents and the language skills practised, to the means of assessment. The use of negotiation in the ESAP course also created some of the conditions that have been suggested "[lead] to teaching and

learning which is as effective as possible" (Breen & Littlejohn, 2000c, p. 9). Moreover, using negotiation in the ESAP course provided the students with more opportunities to actively use and interact in English, opportunities which had been almost completely missing in the Faculty's EMI courses.

1. Introduction

This chapter concerns an action research (AR) project regarding an English for Specific Academic Purposes (ESAP) course at the Faculty of Economics and Management at the Free University of Bozen-Bolzano to undergraduate economics students. The chapter will briefly describe the ESAP course and its role in the Faculty's degree programmes, and the reason why it was deemed necessary to redesign the course. There will be an overview of the needs analysis that was undertaken, the results of which were used to inform the redesign of the syllabus, which used (and still uses) a blended approach using features from both product and process syllabuses. The chapter will focus on the findings from the questionnaires administered to the students, but particularly on the findings from the academic staff that were responsible for teaching the courses using EMI at the time, and will make reference to various similarities and differences from other studies on EMI programmes in Italy and internationally. The chapter will conclude by analysing how using this innovative approach to ESP syllabus design addressed some of the students' language difficulties and how this approach could be extended in analagous situations where study programmes are characterised by EMI.

2. Background Context and Aim of Study

The Free University of Bozen-Bolzano is an Italian university located in the predominantly German-speaking province of South Tyrol. Data show that 69.4% of the South Tyrolean population state German is their first language (L1), 26% Italian and 4.5% Ladin (ASTAT, 2015). The University was founded in 1997 with the aim of offering most of its degree programmes with three

languages of instruction, where English is used as a medium of instruction (EMI) on an equal footing with Italian and German. The Faculty of Economics and Management, where the research took place, follows this model for its undergraduate degree programmes in Economics and Management (E&M) and Economics and Social Sciences (PPE), and endeavours to distribute the languages as equally as possible over the subjects offered in these degree programmes and so, as an example, Economics is taught and examined in English, Private Law in Italian and Financial Risk Management in German. Since the programmes' subjects are only offered in one language, approximately two-thirds of a programme's courses are taught in a student's second (L2) or third language (L3). English is therefore used as a medium of instruction, as is German and Italian, but the difference is that almost all students who follow programmes at the Faculty have either German or Italian as their L1; in fact recent data show that of the total number of students enrolled at the Faculty, 33.6% have German as their L1, 60.5% have Italian and 5% have another L1 other than German and Italian. However, only a further 1% have English as their L1 (Student Secretariat of the Free University of Bozen-Bolzano, personal communication, 28 July 2020). Therefore, the vast majority of students following a course using EMI have English as their L2 or even their L3, which also contributes to the wide range of English proficiency levels amongst the students.

Moreover, the courses taught in English are held almost exclusively by lecturers who do not have English as their L1, which again differs from the courses held in German and Italian which, almost without exception, are held respectively by lecturers with German or Italian as their L1. Little support is provided to lecturers who have to use EMI; in the past three years an optional one-week course on methodological issues related to teaching multilingual classes has been offered, but this was addressed to lecturers using any of the three languages and there was no specific provision for those using EMI (Lucie Courteau, personal communication). Given these specific considerations related to the Faculty's teaching model therefore, the ESAP course, which runs concurrently with other subjects taught in English, had been initially conceived to provide extra skills practice and language input in English to assist in the study of those other courses using EMI.

However, no real needs analysis had ever been undertaken and despite purporting to be an ESAP course, which is a branch of English for Specific Purposes (ESP), the syllabus, which had always been relatively vague and without a clear framework, did not comply with a fundamental principle of ESP, in that "it is an approach to language learning, which is based on learner need" (Hutchinson & Waters, 1987, p. 19).

Before this research project began, the ESAP course had used a skills-based approach to syllabus design, and the course had been mostly teacher-fronted due to the large numbers of students attending the course (sometimes reaching 60 in a class). Based on the fact that the students had to use various English language skills in their EMI courses, and on the findings from the initial needs analysis, I decided that the skills approach to the syllabus would be maintained. However, I also held the firm intention to provide each individual student with significantly more opportunities to engage in more relevant skills practice than had previously been the case in the teacher-fronted course. This intention was influenced not only by my desire to make the ESAP course more interactive and beneficial, but also by some of the findings from the data collection, which indicated that the students were not engaging in as much language practice in the EMI classrooms as might be imagined.

Consequently, in order to provide a skills-based syllabus, but that would be more tailored to each student's individual learning needs, a blended approach to syllabus design was needed. A skills-based approach to syllabus design is an example of a product approach where "the focus is on the knowledge and skills which learners should gain as a result of instruction" (Nunan, 1988, p. 27), in other words, "learning is supposed to result in a product – a set of knowledge and skills" (Graves, 2008, p. 160). A process approach to syllabus design, however, focuses on the "processes through which knowledge and skills might be gained" (Nunan, 1988, p. 41). Breen & Littlejohn (2000c, p. 29) state more simply that a process syllabus provides a framework for decision-making in the classroom, which is undertaken by both the teacher and the learners through the use of negotiation. Negotiation, according to Breen & Littlejohn, is "discussion between all members of the classroom to decide how learning and teaching are to be organised" (2000b, p. 1). Therefore, the redesigned ESAP syllabus would be designed to incorporate

opportunities for classroom negotiation between me and the students, as well as between the students themselves, which aimed not only to provide more opportunities for skills practice, but would also allow the students to engage more actively in the decision-making aspects of their course.

3. Research Methodology

3.1 Action Research

The research tradition that underpinned this study was action research, more precisely a multi-cycle action research study, mainly due to the practical nature of the study, and the fact that it was aiming to affect change in the teaching context. Burns (2010, p. 2), when referring specifically to AR that is used in English language teaching, defines it as "a self-reflective, critical, and systematic approach to exploring your own teaching context" where teachers problematise a situation and then attempt to find approaches to improve that situation. AR, as we mainly understand it today, tends to have a cyclical form and usually there are four clear "moments": Plan – Action – Observation – Reflection (Kemmis & McTaggart, 1988) as illustrated in Figure 1.
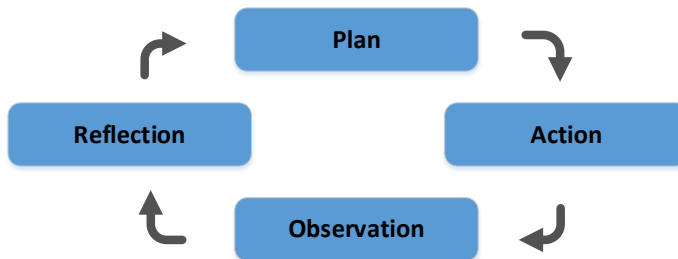

Fig. 1 – The action research cycle(s)

This study had three distinct AR cycles, since it lasted for three academic years, and although data collection occurred throughout the AR cycles, for the purposes of this chapter, I will focus on the initial and main data collection and analysis that occurred in the first AR cycle, which was used in the main

needs analysis to create the redesigned syllabus. The two main research questions that I was seeking answers to at this stage were:

- What are the English-language skills needed by economics students at this trilingual university as perceived by the main "actors", i.e. students and lecturers?
- What skills practice should be maintained or enhanced in the syllabus?

3.2   Data Collection - Mixed Methods

In order to collect answers to these questions, a mixed methods research approach was used and the research design was convergent parallel mixed methods in the initial needs analysis phase in the first AR cycle. The conceptual framework of this study therefore involved data obtained from both qualitative and quantitative research. In order to conduct the initial needs analysis for the redesign of the ESAP course, it was decided that data would be obtained qualitatively from the lecturers who were using EMI by using semi-structured interviews, given the relatively small number of respondents, and quantitative data would be obtained from the students from an online questionnaire, given the practicalities of collecting data from a large and potentially widely-scattered target population.

The convergent parallel mixed methods design involves the collection of quantitative and qualitative data in parallel, which are then merged in order to achieve triangulation. Often in this design "the quantitative sample proceeds from a random or non-random sampling procedure, while the qualitative sample proceeds from purposeful sampling" (Creswell, 2015, p. 78), which was broadly reflected in this study. The questionnaire was sent as an email invitation to all the students enrolled in the two degree programmes used in the study, E&M and PPE. Consequently, the methodology used to collect data from the students was combining random sampling with a rational means of selection, in other words the deliberately chosen target population, which is regarded as being "a particularly effective method for surveys with a specific focus" (Dörnyei, 2003a, p. 73). In all, 151 completed questionnaires were returned. The qualitative data were collected from a purposeful sample since the target population was clearly defined: it comprised the members of

staff who used English as a medium of instruction. At the time of the study, there were ten members of staff using EMI in their courses.
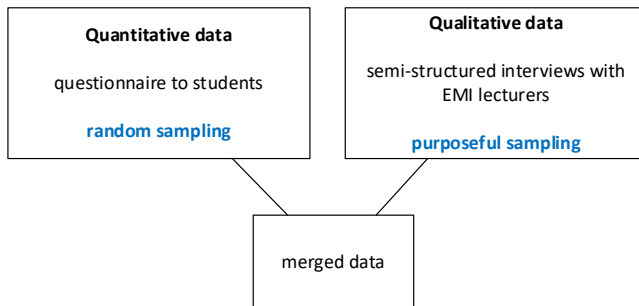

Fig. 2 − Sampling used in the convergent parallel mixed methods design

4. Data Analysis

The quantitative data from the students were analysed following a procedure presented by Dörnyei (2003a; 2007) where the data were explored, coding frames were applied and then the data was displayed. The qualitative data were analysed following the eight-step coding process according to Tesch (1990), where the interviews were transcribed, open and axial coding were applied, and categories were generated which were subsequently represented visually in conceptual frameworks. Once all the data had been explored, coded and displayed, the results that were produced were then merged following the procedure for convergent parallel mixed methods design.

4.1   Questionnaires – Discussion of Findings

There were 151 questionnaires returned, and almost 80% of the sample were following the E&M degree programme, and a third of them were in the second year. The course that I was teaching at the time the questionnaire went online was the course for second-year E&M students, which could explain why more students from these two cohorts completed the questionnaire, even if numerically there were more first-year students enrolled at the Faculty. As far as

their first languages are concerned, the groups comprised an almost equal distribution between L1 Italian and L1 German, despite the Faculty having an overall distribution of approximately 70% Italian L1 students at the time of the study. No students stated they had English as an L1.

The data that were collected from the students in the questionnaires sought to provide some answers to the first research question of this study. Therefore, one aim of the questionnaires was to collect data regarding effectively what skills students had to use in their studies at the Faculty. Questions were designed to investigate the type of skills activities undertaken by the students in their studies, as well as the difficulties encountered in the various skills.

From the findings generated by the responses to the questionnaire, it emerged that all four skills were used in their studies where EMI was used, and the activities that students engaged in most frequently concerning the receptive skills were reading study material, textbooks and emails, and listening to their lecturers and other students giving presentations in class. As far as the productive skills were concerned, the most frequent writing activities were writing exam answers and emails, and the most frequent speaking activities were interacting with academic staff and other students, and making presentations.

As far as the difficulties encountered were concerned, the skill that was evaluated as being the least difficult was reading, followed by listening. Speaking was rated as the next most difficult skill, while the most difficult overall was writing.

The questionnaires also sought to explore the frequency of practice of each skill and respondents were asked how often they engaged in the practice of these skills. The Pearson chi-square test was then used to investigate whether students' self-reported proficiency in a skill had any relationship with the amount of practice they stated they did in that skill. The results for writing can be seen in Table 1 below:

Table 1 − Relationship between frequency of practice and self-reported difficulties regarding writing

	v. difficult	quite difficult	quite easy	v. easy
once a week or less	8.2%	45.7%	39.7%	6.5%
2-3 times a week	7.0%	29.6%	51.3%	12.2%
every day	7.4%	37.3%	44.4%	11.0%

From this table, and reading along the rows, it can be seen that just over half (53.9%) of the students who stated they practised writing once a week or less found writing difficult, whereas a significant proportion of students (55.4%) who practised every day found writing *quite* or *very easy*. The Pearson chi-square test that was generated with this test shows a significant *p*-value of 0.004.

The analysis was extended to the other three skills and the chi-square test analyses showed overall a significant relationship between the students' amount of practice and their self-reported level of difficulty in that skill, but only for speaking and writing. From these findings, therefore, it is difficult to state that *generally* there could be a relationship between the amount of practice students undertake and their self-reported levels of difficulty in the skills. However, this study has shown that there does seem to be a relationship between how much these particular students stated they practise a skill and their level of difficulty in that skill, but only for the productive skills. There are various reasons why this relationship was not demonstrated for the receptive skills, including the possibility that the respondents overestimated their ability in these skills, which was the case in a similar study where students were also asked to complete self-assessment surveys (Huang, 2010). There have also been concerns raised with using self-assessment data from learners in needs analysis since the data they provide may not always be reliable (Auerbach, 1995; Long, 2005c; Huang, 2010), which is one of the reasons why this study used a mixed methods approach when collecting the data and approached two target populations.

4.2   Semi-Structured Interviews – Discussion of Findings

The interviews that were conducted in the first AR cycle in order to gather further information about the target situation took place with ten lecturers who were teaching subjects using EMI. The details concerning these lecturers has been reproduced in Table 2 below.

Table 2 − Interview participants − basic data

alias	subject taught	L1
Dario	International Finance	Italian
Enzo	Economic Policy for PPE	Italian
Ivan	Financial Analysis	Russian/Byelorussian
Riccardo	Financial Risk Management	Italian
Oscar	Principles of Philosophy	Italian
Claire	Introduction to Accounting	French
Ottavio	Information Systems and Data Management	Italian
Fabio	Economics	Italian
Benno	Political Science 1	Italian
Rodion	Mathematics for Economists A & B	Russian

The data collected and analysed from the interviews with the academic staff tended to intersect with much of the data analysed from the questionnaires concerning the skills needed and used in the subjects using EMI, although there were some important divergences. The *Use of English* conceptual framework that was developed from the coding, and is depicted in Figure 3 presented the skills that were mentioned by the academic staff as being used in the classroom and for the exam.
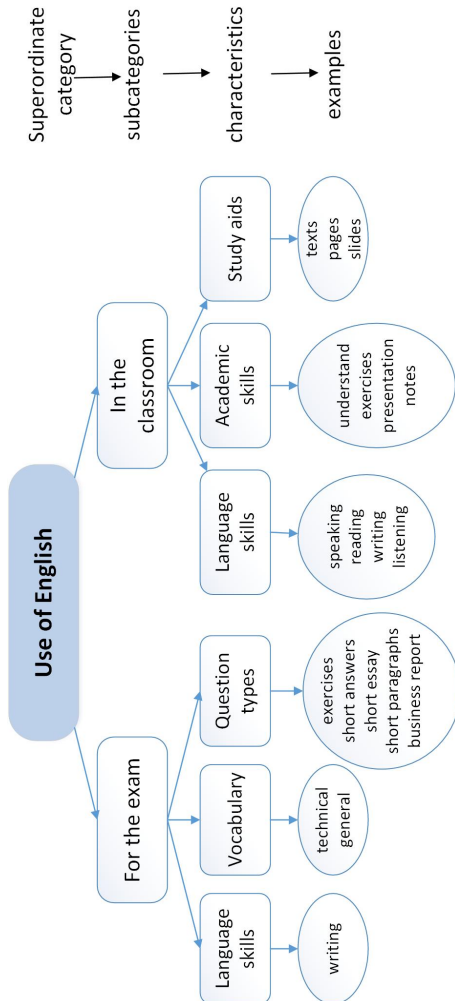
Fig. 3 − The *Use of English* conceptual framework

In the classroom, reference to all four skills was coded and integrated into the *Language skills* subcategory. Reference to the skills used in the exam, however, was included in the *Language skills* subcategory emanating from the *for the*

exam main subcategory, as can be seen from the conceptual framework. Although all four skills were used in the classroom, the skill mentioned for the exam was writing, with only one reference to reading.

The order that the skills are presented in the conceptual framework in Figure 3 shows the frequency of the references made, so speaking in the classroom was referred to more often than any of the other skills. A word frequency analysis was undertaken using NVivo to establish this aspect, and Table 3 shows how the four language skills were referred to.

Table 3 − Aggregated references to skills use in the classroom from the interview data

skill	aggregated *in vivo* coding	no. of occurrences
speaking	talking	16
	interact	14
	discuss	11
	speak	8
reading	reading	17
writing	notes	10
	writing	10
listening	listen	8

From this analysis shown in Table 3, therefore, it can be seen that speaking was the skill used in the classroom that was referenced the most frequently with 49 occurrences in total, considering the synonyms and other related words for speaking. In fact, all of the lecturers, except for Rodion, the lecturer for Mathematics for Economists A & B, explicitly mentioned that the students were required to speak English in their classes. The next most frequent activity that was mentioned was reading, followed by writing with twenty occurrences, and listening. As can be seen from the table, there were ten occurrences of the word "writing" yet there were also ten occurrences of references to "notes", which, in the conceptual framework, was coded separately as an academic skill. For this particular analysis in Table 3, however, it is included in the *writing* category given that taking notes is a writing activity.

The conceptual framework in Figure 3 also depicts the skills used in the exams administered for the different courses taught in English and the main skill that was referred to was writing, which occurred 17 times. All the exams at the Faculty are administered as a written exam, and no oral exams are required apart from in the exams for the various language for specific academic purposes courses, which are not only offered in English but also in German and Italian. Therefore the fact that writing was the main skill that was referred to being used in the exams is not surprising. However, some lecturers mentioned that the exams they administered did not even require much writing in English given that some of the courses taught in English at the time were mathematical or financial subjects. Ivan, the lecturer for Financial Analysis stated that "the exam is on the laptops, they do the exercises which are very much numerically based so they don't have to write lots" and Riccardo, who taught Financial Risk Management, stated "they don't need English it's just maths" when referring to the questions used in the exam. The other skill that was referred to for the exam was reading, but this was only mentioned when discussing the students' problems in one exam. Consequently, the use of skills mentioned by the lecturers in the interviews tended to focus more on the multiple skills needed to be used in the classroom, rather than the skills needed in the exam.

The main findings from the analysis of the conceptual framework concerning the language skills needed therefore showed that all the language skills were required in the EMI classrooms that were studied, but only writing was required in the exams. Of the skills needed in the classroom, speaking was the most frequently mentioned, followed in order of frequency by reading, writing and listening.

The interviews also sought to investigate the problems encountered by the students and lecturers in the target situation and as such functioned also as a present-situation analysis, like parts of the questionnaire. The *Problems encountered in the target situation* conceptual framework depicted in Figure 4 presents the findings from this analysis and divided the problems into the three main categories, language problems, content problems and problems related to classroom management.
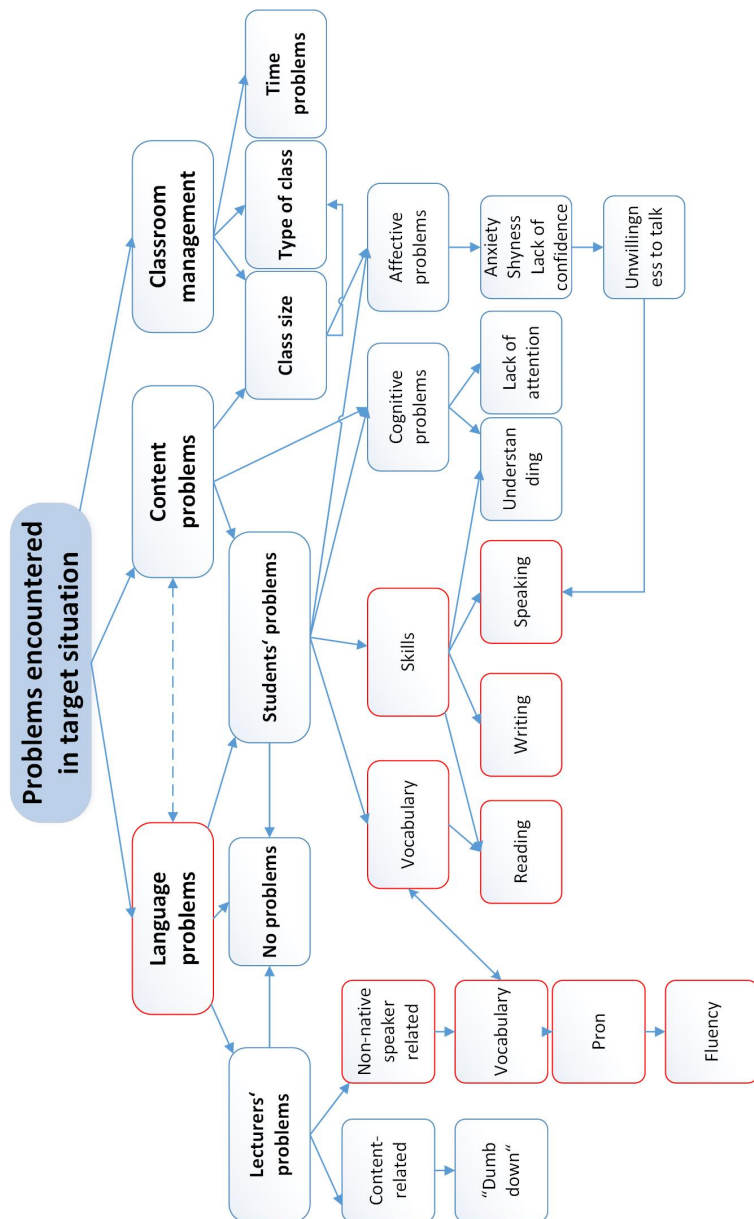
Fig. 4 − The *Problems encountered in the target situation* conceptual framework

The language problems were further divided into the lecturers' problems and the students' problems as well as the subcategory *no problems*. This third category was added as several lecturers had referred to areas where there were no problems, especially when referring to their own use of English as a medium of instruction. Dario, when referring to his own language problems, stated "Usually no I don't have any problem when I lecture absolutely no". Benno also answered in the negative when asked about any problems he may have had lecturing, "I don't think I have any particular problem". Rodion, the mathematics lecturer, also felt he had no problems with the language. The fact that some of these comments came from the lecturers of mathematics and scientific subjects mirrors findings from a study conducted with participants from Austria, Italy and Poland that examined higher education teachers' attitudes to English-medium instruction. This study showed that some lecturers felt they had few or even no problems teaching in English since "there was a belief that teaching science and maths was easy and required little language" (Dearden & Macaro, 2016, p. 471).

The comments that were coded into the *no problems* subcategory, however, almost always related to the lecturers not having problems with the language. It was only Riccardo who actually referred to the students not having any problems with the language. He explicitly mentioned three times in his interview that in his view the students did not have any problems, even going as far as stating at one point, "they speak very well, they haven't problem about the English no no absolutely no". However, he was also the only interviewee who stated that he felt that his English was of a lower proficiency level than that of the students: "my level is not so high […] in my opinion the background of this student is higher than mine". Consequently, because he was the only lecturer to admit that his English skills were perhaps lower than those of some of the students he was teaching, this could imply that he was unsure what English language level would actually be required by his students. The fact that lecturers who teach in English may be unaware of the language levels needed by their students to follow an EMI course has been noted elsewhere (Dearden & Macaro, 2016, p. 472). However, another reason for Riccardo's statement could be due to the fact that "Italy lags behind other European countries in terms of multilingualism and in particular the learning of English"

(Costa & Coleman, 2013, p. 6). The Eurobarometer survey conducted by the European Commission (2012) showed that Italy was ranked second from last among 27 EU nations regarding self-reported proficiency in a second language. In fact only 38% of Italians surveyed claimed to be able to speak at least one foreign language, compared to the EU average of 54%. There is, therefore, a tendency for Italians to admit to a low level of competence in other languages, especially English, which was documented by Dearden & Macaro (2016) in their study, even if perhaps this is only a perception. Thus, this general lack of confidence in their foreign language skills shown by Italians could be a reason for Riccardo's statement that his English was lower than that of some of the students.

The *language problems* category in the *Problems encountered in the target situation* conceptual framework depicted in Figure 4 also comprised the students' problems, and this was unsurprisingly the category that covered the most areas in the conceptual framework, given the focus of the target situation analysis and therefore the questions asked in the interviews. The students' language problems were subdivided into *vocabulary* and *skills* and were coded as purely language problems in the conceptual framework using red as the outline for the language problems and using one arrow originating solely from the *Students' problems* subcategory. The lecturers also referred to other problems experienced by the students, which were coded as *cognitive* and *affective* problems, but because these could not be classed as pure language problems but clearly had an effect on the language aspects, they were connected by more than one arrow. Therefore, some lecturers reported that students manifested problems that were coded as *cognitive* but these tended to originate from issues regarding the content of the classes rather than the language used.

Vocabulary problems were mentioned by several lecturers, referring mainly to students having difficulty with the specific lexis used for the subject. Oscar, the lecturer of Philosophy, mentioned the problems the students experienced with the specific terminology used in philosophy on several occasions and at one point discusses the problems students faced at length:

> I don't know how much they read the text but even in class we read the text together and they don't ask the words they don't know. I have to ask them, do you know this word and they're uh? and then I explain it but it's strange, I don't know why they don't do that because maybe they are afraid.

As philosophy is one of the more language-heavy subjects that is taught in English at the Faculty, the fact that students experienced problems with specific terminology would be understandable. Other lecturers mentioned problems with specific terminology, including Ottavio, who stated "Sometimes they have problems knowing the right words, depends on the topic but some topics they have problems knowing the right English words". Ivan also recognised that students had problems in his Financial Analysis course and referred to how he tried to mitigate these problems: "I try to simplify the scientific language so that I am sure they have come across the words and I am using in the exam questions during the course". In contrast, Fabio stated that the students did not have a problem understanding technical terms but in fact had problems understanding more general words. He gave the following example:

> I'm there to explain the technical terms but sometimes either in the exam and in the class they lack in understanding also basic terms, that is for instance… once I made the example of demand and supply in the automobile sector, what happens to the sector of tyres. I had questions… what does tyre mean?

Consequently, although many of the lecturers did not explicitly state that they felt students experienced problems with vocabulary, when problems were mentioned, they tended to focus on the specific vocabulary needed for the subject. This finding corresponds with another study conducted by Evans & Morrison (2011) that investigated the use of English in an English-medium university in Hong Kong using a similar approach to that used in my study where a questionnaire to students to elicit their perceived strengths and weaknesses in the four skills was administered, although they then conducted follow-up interviews with a sample of those students. An important general theme that emerged from their interview data was 'technical vocabulary' and

in particular, students' "inability to understand key technical vocabulary" resulted in problems in reading and listening (Evans & Morrison, 2011, p. 393). However, in their study, it emerged from the students' accounts that the lecturers of the EMI classes were often "oblivious" to the problems caused by a lack of technical vocabulary knowledge (Evans & Morrison, 2011, p. 393), which certainly contrasts with the findings from my study. Moreover, in my study, one lecturer referred to the problems students had with general vocabulary.

Although some of the lecturers mentioned problems the students experienced with vocabulary, the main language problems tended to focus on the skills. Reference to problems in all the four skills was made, but the skills that were regarded as presenting the most problems were speaking and writing. Speaking problems were identified by five of the lecturers (Dario, Ivan, Claire, Ottavio and Fabio) and comprised difficulties connected to a lack of fluency (Fabio). However, most lecturers did not necessarily focus on the speaking problems themselves but rather the cause of the problems, which became its own category, affective problems, which included *anxiety*, *shyness* and *lack of confidence* in the conceptual framework due to the prevalence of these aspects being mentioned. Some of the comments from the lecturers concerning this aspect concentrated solely on students' lack of confidence with spoken English: "I see that they have… they're not confident with their speaking" (Claire) and "In class of course some of them are not confident with their spoken English" (Oscar) whereas Dario felt that it was the use of English that exacerbated an already existing lack of confidence: "well probably some of them are shy beforehand but I believe that – the speaking in a foreign language is part of the story". Moreover, Fabio stated "this year for instance I had a very low responses to… I don't know what happened, they were quite shy", implying that he felt that it depended on the cohort and that a lack of confidence was perhaps not necessarily a regular occurrence.

Students' reticence to speak in the EMI classroom is a phenomenon that has been observed for some time (Tsui, 1996; Chang, 2010; Soruç & Griffiths, 2018), and this has been attributed to multiple factors originating from the learners themselves, from the methodology used by their teachers and from the settings in which the learning takes place. Benno, when mentioning this

aspect, focused on the fact that although some students seemed to understand the subject matter, he felt that it was anxiety about their English proficiency that was preventing them from interacting in the classroom:

> Sometimes the students who are less confident, not so much in the discipline that is being taught but in the language, in English, actually are more shy.

The phenomenon of shyness hindering speaking output was also observed in the study by Dearden & Macaro (2016, p. 473) where it was the "students' poor level of English [that] inhibited their learning, made them embarrassed". Indeed, this fear that is often displayed by less proficient language learners has shown to increase what is known as "communication apprehension", which refers to an individual's "fear or anxiety associated with either real or anticipated communication with another person or persons" (McCroskey, 2001, p. 40). This apprehension can lead to learners actively avoiding situations where speaking is required, which "deprives learners of the practice that they need in order to improve their speaking skills and become confident language users" (Zhang & Head, 2010, p. 2). This aspect was also mentioned by Dario, who referred to the fact that he felt students were impeded from speaking in class due to this apprehension, which then had effect on communicating their subject knowledge:

> However for some of them they are handicapped because they know things but they are just afraid of speaking out loud.

Oscar had also identified a similar trait when he spoke about the students' unwillingness to ask him about unknown words, and he also attributed it to the students' anxiety, using the term "afraid", like Dario above, and so this was coded together with the other references to affective problems. Claire was another lecturer that commented on this unwillingness to speak out in class, although she did not directly attribute it to any of the factors the other lecturers had mentioned, when she stated: "Sometimes they will act as if they are struggling with the content but in fact they just don't want to answer in English I think". Willingness to communicate (WTC) in an L2 differs from WTC

in a person's native language since the individual's communicative competence in the L2 is a "powerful modifying variable" (Dörnyei, 2003b, p. 12). Studies have found that learners with a lower language proficiency can experience greater anxiety when having to speak out in class and thus they can demonstrate less willingness to communicate (Thompson & Lee, 2013; Thompson & Khawaja, 2016). However, communicative competence and WTC are not the same and it has been noted that learners who are competent L2 speakers might avoid communicative situations in the L2 and less proficient speakers might actively seek opportunities to engage in L2 interaction (Dörnyei, 2003b). This aspect is clearly visible in the following extract from Claire who stated:

> Some of them answer, some of them are very good and I know they know the answer, they just stand there and wait for me to ask and then, Paolo what do you think and then Paolo gets up with a perfect answer in perfect English.

The fact that learners demonstrate anxiety in an EMI context, which then prevents them from speaking, has also been attributed to the settings that characterise EMI. A recently published study, which investigated an EMI context in Turkey by administering an open-ended questionnaire to students, found that many difficulties experienced by the students in their speaking were due to affective aspects such as shyness and feeling embarrassed. These affective aspects were often attributed to the way the classes were delivered, which "were conducted along fairly traditional lecture-style lines" (Soruç & Griffiths, 2018, p. 40). Aslan & Thompson (2018) also suggest that anxiety about classroom performance could be due to the typical teacher-fronted nature of the context they studied.

Learner reticence has also been attributed to certain methodological practices that are often used by the teacher or lecturer in class, particularly in traditional teacher-fronted classrooms. These practices include teachers' intolerance of silence and thus a shorter wait time, so that the turn is either reallocated or teachers provide the answer themselves, uneven allocation of turns where the more confident students are more frequently called upon, and incomprehensible input where a lack of responses is attributed to learners not

understanding instructions or questions (Tsui, 1996, p. 151–154). An example of the uneven allocation of turns was provided by Claire when she stated:

> I choose the students I ask. I know about their level and when I see one is struggling, I will not, I will ask for help from somebody else and I try not to ask students that I know will have difficulties

The strategy exemplified in this extract is efficient in advancing through the class, especially when there are time constraints to which Claire also makes a reference when she states "I have so [many] things to do in the class time that I have that I don't have time". However, it has been shown that uneven allocation of turns can make the weaker or shyer students feel neglected and "the more they feel neglected, the less willing they are to contribute" (Tsui, 1996, p. 154). Consequently, the fact that anxiety and shyness are factors that hinder learners' willingness to speak, even if they do not necessarily always derive from a learners' communicative competence, is clearly demonstrated from the data collected from the EMI lecturers in this study.

Apart from speaking, the other skill that was mentioned most frequently by the lecturers as being problematic for the students, and was coded and added to the conceptual framework, was writing. These problems arose mainly in the exams, which, as mentioned, are all conducted as written exams in the Faculty. Oscar, the lecturer for Philosophy stated:

> They write in German or Italian with English words of course. So they don't know what an English sentence is, they don't know how to connect two sentences, many of them… the fact that how a sentence is meant to be connected in order for a English eye to make sense of what is written.

This comment focuses on problems that originated from syntax and discourse features rather than lexical problems since he referred to the students' difficulties to create cohesive texts that follow typical English syntactical structures. Claire, however, focused on the assignments the students had to produce for her course, rather than the writing done in the exam, and how she felt students had difficulties expressing their own ideas in English. She stated:

> They are not confident even in their writing because they quote a lot, they copy and paste, in first year much more than in third year because third year they know I can detect it but in first year the report I see a lot of copy and paste but…

In this case, their difficulties resulted in a tendency to resort to copying from other sources, an academic problem that she ascribed to originating from a lack of language proficiency. Another problem for students when writing was highlighted by Benno, who referred to students' tendency to write too much when answering questions, thus losing coherence in their texts and failing to complete the set task adequately:

> They always try to look competent, knowledgeable by writing long answers and I say, well the first thing is stay on topic because of course that's more important.

The comments shown in these extracts, therefore, tended to relate to problems regarding specific academic writing skills especially related to connected discourse and syntax. They also concerned difficulties in producing texts that had not been copied from elsewhere. Although the inability to produce texts that are not copied could stem from a lack of academic skills such as poor referencing or inadequate citations, or indeed, from a deliberate desire to cheat, it could also be due to difficulties with the language, as Claire implied. Indeed, "a growing body of research into L2 students' source-based writing has revealed language-related problems which may lead to inadvertent plagiarism" (Pecorari & Petrić, 2014, p. 275), so it is likely that the students in this study were either lacking writing subskills such as paraphrasing and summarising in certain cases or perhaps were even lacking specific reading skills. The problem for students to produce texts without resorting to plagiarism because of their lack of language proficiency has also been addressed by Hyland (2001, p. 380), who found that,

> After they mentally compare their texts with target 'expert texts', they may feel so overwhelmed by the distance between what they are expected to achieve and what they feel capable of doing, that plagiarism seems the most realistic strategy.

Consequently, Claire's assertion that her students' attempts to copy from other sources in their assignments originated from language difficulties rather than from any desire to act dishonestly would seem reasonable.

From the analysis of the *Problems encountered in the target situation* conceptual framework, therefore, the most useful and relevant findings were that the students, when they experienced language problems, were most likely to have problems with their speaking, to a lesser extent their writing and also with vocabulary. The speaking problems tended to be influenced by affective factors, such as anxiety and shyness, which prevented many students from engaging in meaningful spoken interaction. These affective factors in turn tended to be influenced by multiple factors, ranging from students' lack of language proficiency to the classroom environment but also most probably by some of the teaching methodology employed by the EMI lecturers. Students' writing problems were generally encountered by the lecturers of the more language-heavy subjects, such as Politics and Accounting, and concerned specific academic writing skills such as producing connected discourse, demonstrating cohesion as well as general problems with syntax. Vocabulary problems were also reported by many lecturers and although they tended to be associated with a lack of knowledge of specific terminology, problems with basic or general vocabulary were also reported. Other problems that were not specifically language problems, but which affected the students' learning included content problems, especially lack of specific subject knowledge, and factors associated with the classroom environment.

4.3 Merged Data – Discussion of Findings

The findings that were generated in the data analysis and the subsequent merging of the data from the two datasets in order to achieve triangulation were used to help answer the first two research questions of this study. As mentioned, the findings that were extrapolated from the interview data with the ten EMI lecturers corroborated much of what was generated by the questionnaires with the students. The lecturers agreed that the four skills were needed in their EMI courses and from a frequency perspective, the most significant appeared to be speaking. As far as their exams were concerned, how-

ever, it was confirmed that writing was the skill that was most frequently required. The qualitative data from the lecturers provided an added perspective to the frequency of use as it became clear from the data that speaking was the skill that was most often referred to when discussing the use of English *in the classroom*; a feature that could not be inferred from the questionnaire data. However, these references to the skills also comprised references to the problems that the lecturers felt the students experienced, and very few mentioned problems related to reading and listening, which were the skills the students reported practising the most.

The data from the lecturers also generally confirmed the data from the students regarding for which purposes the skills were used. While not being able to provide information about the actual language proficiency levels of the students, the lecturers were able to provide information about the problems they felt the students experienced in their classes and exams. Although there were many language problems mentioned, problems also concerned other aspects that had an impact on the teaching and learning, such as affective and cognitive issues as well as issues connected to the specific content of the subjects taught in English. The findings showed that the lecturers felt speaking English in class was the most significant problem for the students, followed by writing problems encountered mainly in the exams, and also problems connected to an insufficient command of the technical and sometimes also basic vocabulary needed to study the various subjects in English.

The data from the interviews also produced findings concerning the origin of the students' language problems, and significantly one of the main reasons given for the students' perceived lack of speaking proficiency was not necessarily their overall communicative competence but their unwillingness to speak, especially due to affective aspects related to anxiety. Although the lecturers did not offer any reasons for this general reticence to speak, the findings from the interview data show that all the courses that used EMI were taught as traditional lectures, almost undoubtedly due to the relatively large class numbers, but also very possibly due to the academic traditions of university teaching in Italy where a traditional lecturing style has been reported as being extremely prevalent (Costa & Coleman, 2013). This traditional teacher-fronted lecturing style was observed by Costa & Coleman in their

study to provide students with few if any meaningful opportunities for inter-action, a phenomenon that has been recognised in other studies of EMI class-rooms (Zhang & Head, 2010; Wilkinson, 2012; Dearden & Macaro, 2016; Soruç & Griffiths, 2018). As a consequence, although most of the lecturers in my study stated that the students needed to speak in their EMI classes, the oppor-tunities for speaking in those classes were probably generally few and far be-tween and would almost certainly not have allowed many opportunities for student-initiated interaction or more prolonged student-student interaction given the class sizes and the traditional lecturing styles employed.

In sum, as far as frequency is concerned, both the students and the lecturers agreed that all four skills were used regularly in the classroom with a divergence in the findings concerning which skill was reported to be the most frequently used. Both the students and lecturers, however, agreed that writing was the main skill that was needed for the exams. As far as proficiency in the skills was concerned, the productive skills were rated as being the weaker skills by the students themselves, and the findings from the interviews with the lecturers tended to correspond with this view.

5. Key Implications for ESAP Syllabus Design

The findings that were generated from the merged datasets in the first AR cycle provided the focus for the redesigned syllabus. The existing syllabus, which was essentially a product syllabus with skills focus, would therefore maintain a focus on the main skills that were regarded as most needed to be improved by the students and the lecturers from a proficiency perspective, in other words writing and speaking, and there would also be a concurrent focus on reading and to a lesser extent on listening, given their frequency of use and therefore relative importance. Significantly, however, the redesigned syllabus would focus on providing students with more opportunities for engaging in the productive skills; in the case of speaking, there would be more opportuni-ties to engage in spoken interaction, especially student-initiated interaction as well as more prolonged student-student interaction in small groups to miti-gate some of the problems due to shyness. This aim evolved not only from the

reported frequency of use of speaking in the classes and the relationship that was demonstrated between the frequency of practice and self-reported proficiency levels, but also from the findings' clear indication that students were almost certainly not provided with opportunities for much, if any extended speaking time in their EMI classes.

As far as writing was concerned, the new syllabus would provide for more individually focused writing activities to provide more relevant writing practice. Moreover, the redesigned syllabus would also incorporate more opportunities for students to participate in the decision-making aspects of the ESAP course, and would therefore introduce elements that could be negotiated. This process approach to syllabus design, which introduces negotiation into the syllabus, would therefore act as a means to provide opportunities "for authentic language use about matters that are of immediate significance to learners" (Breen & Littlejohn, 2000c, p. 19) and so would provide opportunities for extended speaking time and, therefore, further opportunities for language and skills improvement, as well as allowing students to participate in some of the decision-making aspects of the course. Consequently, the process approach that used negotiation would directly benefit the skills-based approach to the syllabus as the negotiation would provide concrete opportunities for the students to engage in focused and relevant skills practice.

5.1 Redesigned ESAP Syllabus – Implementation Problems and Evaluation

The redesigned syllabus was implemented in the second AR cycle of this study where students were given the option to negotiate various aspects of their ESAP course with me directly. This implementation proved unsuccessful mainly due to a lack of student interest. In order to obtain feedback from all the students who had chosen not to negotiate the course contents available, therefore, a survey was distributed at the beginning of their written exam in order to gain as many responses as possible. The main findings were that the students generally felt that reading *Freakonomics* (Levitt & Dubner, 2005), the basis of the alternative to the negotiated elements of the course, was more interesting and less time-consuming than negotiating their own content. Conse-

quently, it seemed clear that if more students were to participate in negotiation, and thus benefit from the opportunities to participate in the decision-making processes of the course, how the source material was to be chosen would have to be reassessed.

A further aspect that arose while reflecting on the implemented syllabus was that the negotiation used in the second AR cycle had not involved classroom-based negotiation, which had been one of the aims of the study in order to provide more student-initiated interaction or more prolonged student-student interaction. Therefore, the modified syllabus to be used in the third AR cycle would also have to include a clear intention to include classroom negotiation.

5.2   Modified ESAP Syllabus – Discussion and Evaluation

The modified syllabus was implemented in the third AR cycle, and this time students were required to undertake the negotiation in the classroom. Moreover, given the problems that had arisen due to the previous cohort's unwillingness to deviate from the previous source material, I decided to maintain *Freakonomics* as the source material for that year. Although this decision might seem inconsistent given the intention to provide students with the freedom to choose, various accounts of unsuccessful negotiated syllabuses had also identified that the failure was often due to students' reluctance to assume responsibility for decisions (see for example Budd & Wright, 1990; Slembrouck, 2000; Boon, 2011).

The procedure was explained clearly to them and they worked in small groups so that they could discuss which chapters or aspects of the book they felt they wanted to focus on in the course without having to worry about speaking out in front of the whole class. The use of a worksheet provided them with a clear framework that aided the structure and contents of the discussion. They were given ample time to engage in student-student interaction in this first phase of the negotiation and then once all the groups had discussed all the aspects in the worksheet, they then negotiated their points with me in a whole-class discussion. As such, this particular class provided many more opportunities for extended speaking practice for each individual student than had ever been possible in previous courses.

Although this is only one example of a class that was characterised by negoti-ation, further negotiation occurred throughout the course as I began to loosen the teacher-control that had previously characterised the course. This, there-fore, provided further opportunities for speaking practice. Moreover, more writing practice was provided through more regular and structured writing tasks, some of which were again negotiated with the students.

Given this study was an action research study, *reflection* is one of the four moments of the cycle, which in this study always incorporated the eval-uation stage(s) of the study. The students were asked to evaluate the modified syllabus at the end of the course, filling in an end-of-course survey that was again administered at the start of the written exam. The data obtained were coded using the same procedure as was used to code the interviews with the EMI lecturers and were visualised in a conceptual framework, which can be seen in Figure 5.
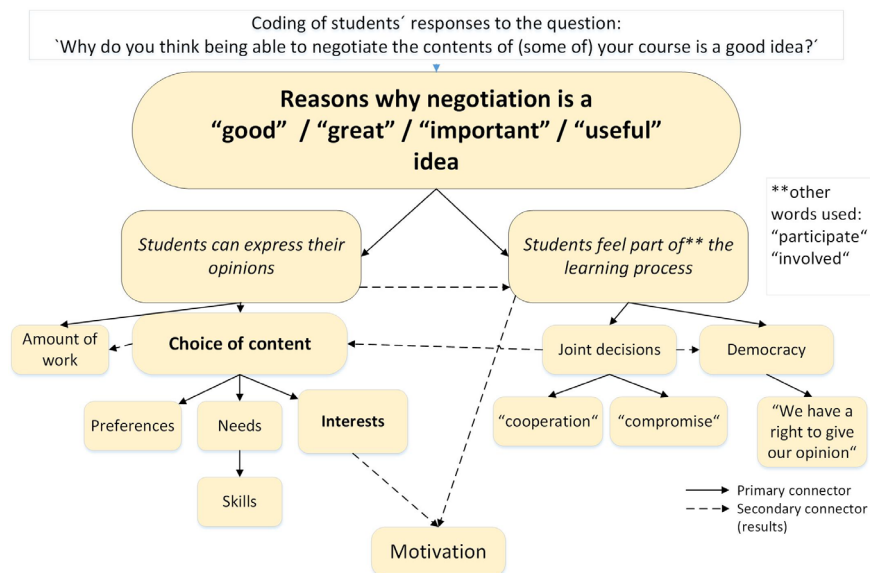
Fig. 5 − Conceptual framework of students' responses in the survey

The students were overwhelmingly positive about using negotiation, and of the 105 completed surveys, only three respondents did not believe using negotiation was beneficial. Of these three, only one gave a reason, stating, "I think that the professor should decide about the content of the course". This comment demonstrates how traditional educational practices with a clear division between the learners and the teacher can still be regarded as the preferred approach by the students concerned, which reflects perhaps the greatest opposition to negotiated syllabuses and which has been reported in other studies (Bloor & Bloor, 1988; Budd & Wright, 1990; Newstetter, 2000; Slembrouck, 2000; Smith, 2000; Sokolik, 2000). However, since the vast majority of the students surveyed in my study were positive about using negotiation in the course, citing aspects such as they felt part of the decision-making process, they could influence the contents based on their interests and needs, and this led to greater motivation, I believe that the approach used where negotiation was blended with a greater focus on skills development was essentially successful.

6. Conclusion

This study has shown that the use of negotiation in the ESAP classroom allowed the students to have opportunities to engage in the decision-making processes of their course. However, using negotiation not only allowed me to consult the students on the course contents, but the negotiation itself also provided opportunities for authentic language practice, an element that this study's findings showed was generally missing from the EMI classes that the students were following. The use of negotiation also provided the students with more opportunities to engage in meaningful tasks which provided authentic target language practice using student-student interaction, which has been observed to be beneficial in skills acquisition (Ortega, 2007).

This study has also provided an insightful classroom-based investigation into the use of a negotiated syllabus in not just a tertiary setting, but a tertiary setting that is characterised by EMI. Therefore, it extends and enhances the work of other researchers who have undertaken classroom-based

research on practical implementations of negotiated syllabuses in university settings, such as Martyn (2000), Newstetter (2000) and Sokolik (2000), among others. Given that most of these studies were completed more than two decades ago, when EMI was in its infancy, this study is certainly timely.

Finally, there may be some doubt that there is a need for ESP or ESAP courses in programmes where EMI is present. However, as this study has shown, the mere fact of following an EMI programme does not necessarily provide students with the language practice needed. In fact, it has recently been stated clearly that "the curricula of English-medium programmes should therefore ideally include ESP and EAP courses" (Schmidt-Unterberger, 2018, p. 530). If these ESP courses are designed to focus not only on the product but also on the process, then perhaps future students will be even better equipped for their future careers in this multicultural, multilingual and multifaceted world.

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