

Title of example of practice: Promoting Collaboration between Content Teachers and Language Teachers for the Master's In European and International Studies

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Institution and initiating department/faculty

(i.e. where examples of practice take place):

Post Graduate School of International Studies, University of Trento in close collaboration with the individual module teachers from the faculties of Law, Economics, Sociology, and Arts and Humanities.

Departments/faculties in which initiative implemented:

Post Graduate School of International Studies, University of Trento, on the English Medium Two-year Master's Degree in European and International Studies

Abstract

(QA question: What are/were you trying to do?)

The English Language programme of the English Medium Two-year Master's Degree ("Laurea Magistrale"¹) in European and International Studies foresees both a credit-bearing English Language Module (8 credits) AND English Language Support (ELS), provided by Language Centre teachers, which complements both the English Language Module and the core content modules of the degree programme. The English Language Programme (ELP) has three main aims which are directly related to the general learning outcomes of the Master's programme: to prepare students for further academic study on a PhD programme; to prepare students for professional life in an international organisation; and to provide students with skills to enable them to be successful life-long learners. To achieve these aims, the Module lecturer and ELS teachers coordinate both with each other and with the content lecturers. While some ELS takes the form of English for Academic Purposes (EAP), both taught classes and individual tutoring, the main focus of both ESP classes and the English Language Module is on transferable skills and strategies and the development of language awareness in relation to different communication conventions in both professional and more informal settings in the international arena. The content of these lessons derives from the four main discipline areas of the Master's programme, namely, law, economics, contemporary history and political science and is the result of close cooperation with the discipline teachers both for content, assignments and assessment. In brief, the English Language programme has both the aim of developing the skills and strategies needed to operate

¹ In Italy two types of master's programmes exist: the first, a two-year "Laurea Magistrale" has to seek approval by the Ministry and conform with strict regulations regarding content, credits, teaching hours, dissertation etc. and is the officially recognised second level degree in the Italian system; the second, a "Master" which can be as short as 3 months or up to two years and has few restrictions on content and form. The quality of these "Master" depends to a great extent on the Institution offering the programme. Italian Universities offer both types.

successfully in the international arena AND become independent language learners able to further both their linguistic and discipline specific knowledge (both scientific and social), i.e. to become efficient life-long learners.

Background – contextual issues giving rise to the initiative

(QA questions: Why are/were you trying to do it? / What are/were the aims and objectives?)

Before describing the specific background of the initiative, certain features of the broader context need to be highlighted:

- Most Italian universities, including Trento, are very ‘traditional’ in their organisation and approach to teaching and learning (talk & chalk, very little student participation);
- Attendance at Italian universities is not compulsory: students can turn up for an exam without ever having attended a single lesson;
- Exams are usually oral ‘book exams’ or written + oral;
- Students focus on exams/credits rather than course content; a student can retake an exam as many times as he/she wishes;
- Continuous assessment is hardly ever used as a form of assessment. Students rarely have to write term papers or give presentations, even on Master’s degrees;
- Languages are given scant consideration by students and lecturers alike, despite being compulsory on all degree courses, both undergraduate and post graduate since 2001;

This then the context in which the programme is offered. Nonetheless, the aim of the Master’s Programmes at the School of International Studies at Trento is to offer truly ‘International’ degrees, not merely offering the programme in English but adopting a more interactive approach to studying with seminars, workshops and simulations. Moreover, this approach, coupled with the importance placed on languages, not only English (students have to have a working knowledge (B2) of a third language), makes it unique in Italy.

To be admitted on the degree programme, students have to pass a B2 level test or have an equivalent internationally recognised certificate. They are expected to reach a level of C1 by the end of the two-year Master’s degree.

The growing success of the Master’s programme in general and the English language programme in particular is thanks to the full support, administrative, financial and moral, of the School Board – a fundamental aspect in the implementation phase – and has resulted in a higher degree of autonomy and programme specific provision than elsewhere in the university.

Specific factors leading to the introduction of the initiative:

In the first year of the Master’s In European and International Studies (2004) the 6 credit English Language Module was seen by students and academic staff as a 48 hour course to be passed, no different from the other Modules and therefore worthy of no more effort – despite it being a two year course, differently from all other one-semester Modules. ELS provision was limited to a short general EAP course. Only two core modules, namely Contemporary History and European and International Law, were held in English. Feedback on the English Language Course was that it was extremely useful but required far more time and effort than any other course or the meagre 6 credits awarded. Moreover, while students viewed the fact that Modules were in English as a positive feature of the degree course, feedback from students and Law Lecturers (both quantitative and qualitative) indicated that the non-law students were having great difficulty in coping with new concepts through a foreign language in the law courses and the Lecturers voiced worries that performance in exams might be negatively affected by poor language proficiency. At the same time, thanks to a policy of Internationalisation, and despite misgivings from several lecturers, the School Board decided that progressively the whole degree course would be delivered in English by 2008, requiring students to participate fully in lectures and seminars as well as do all assignments and exams in English. These factors presented a double challenge for the ELP: providing effective ELS for a programme delivered in English and convincing the students that all the time and effort spent on the English assignments was worth it. The immediate needs were perceived as being ESP Law support and EAP support both of which would involve close collaboration with content course lecturers to make the content of these lessons and workshops more relevant to the degree course. Likewise the English module would ‘shadow’ the degree course as a whole; the form and content

would be negotiated with the students both at the start of and during each semester to increase motivation. The Board recognised the students' request that English receive greater recognition and the credits for the Module were increased from 6 to 9 over the two years, later changed to 8 + 4 with the introduction of nationwide reforms in 2008.

Continued evaluation and revision has led to deeper collaboration with the Law Lecturers and increased collaboration with other Lecturers, in particular Political Science and more recently Economics and History leading to new joint initiatives.

Description of activity or initiative

(QA question: How is/was the activity/initiative implemented?)

Overview

Currently, the English Language Programme consists of a Compulsory English Language Module (8 credits) in Year 1; optional English Language Module (4 credits) in Year 2; and English Language Support (no credits) over the two years which provide language support both for the English Language Modules and other Content Modules. The course adopts a student-centred, content based approach. Academic assignments (student-led seminars, debates, term papers, academic papers etc) are closely related to both the content of core modules, based on input from course lecturers and students' own areas of interest. Professional assignments are based on actual tasks carried out by students during internships with international organisations.

Even though these students are not language specialists, the Module focuses on **language awareness** and developing certain linguistic notions, in particular relating to lexis and lexical relations, discourse, pragmatics, genre and register. This enables students to become more aware language learners, of both specialist and every day or 'social' language, and as a consequence more independent learners.

As the Module Lecturer has classes with the whole group (30-40 students), these classes focus in the main on developing language awareness and critical thinking skills, as an extension of reading, listening and debating activities.

Assessment in Year 1 takes the form of continuous assessment (70%) and a written and oral exam (30%). Non-attending students are also required to do an academic presentation during the oral exam. In Year 2 the focus of tasks is on developing professional skills related to the discipline areas. An integrated task-based approach is the basis of all coursework and assessment. All tasks are based on needs analysis provided by students returning from internships with international organisations such as the EU, the UN, the OECD and the OSCE, as well as various Embassies and Consulates around the world, and information and materials provided by former students now working full time in the field of international relations. Some consultation also takes place with faculty members who have either worked or have contacts with similar organisations and institutions. An important part of the Year 2 programme are the simulated meetings, debates and negotiations. In earlier editions the topics of these simulations were proposed by the students. In later editions, with increased collaboration with content lecturers, these simulations are sometimes an integral part of discipline modules.

Whenever possible, negotiations, presentations and debates are filmed to enable self-assessment, peer assessment and the joint-assessment of the English lecturer and ELS teacher who work in close collaboration throughout the year and more recently the content module lecturers.

English Language Support

English Language Support in Year 1 consists of EAP and specific support for the Law Modules. ELS classes and workshops are conducted in smaller groups to enable teachers to follow students individually.

EAP These workshops focus on developing academic writing skills. The ELS teacher works in collaboration with core module professors and lecturers to identify the types of assignment required of students. The content of the work produced in these workshops is chosen by the students themselves and can be, but not necessarily so, work they are preparing for their other core modules.

ELS-Law This is not intended as an ESP course, but as specific language support for the core modules of International and EU Law. There is very close collaboration between the Law professors and lecturers and the ELS teacher. At the start of each year the professors and teacher decide which aspects of EU and International law will be focused upon, which cases will be covered by whom (during lectures or ELS) and which aspects to focus on. During ELS classes there is a great focus on linguistic aspects such as specific

lexis, collocations, use of prepositions and articles, use of modality etc all notions which have previously been dealt with in the English Module and which are transferrable to other disciplines. There is also an analysis of the particular features of the language of EU law compared with International Law. Some ELS lessons also specifically help prepare students for participating in moot courts organised by the Law lecturers

In Year 2 **EAP** consists in Dissertation writing workshops and tutoring, covering all aspects of writing a Master's dissertation, including bibliographical referencing, writing an abstract, using statistical data to support a thesis, formulate research questions, using research tools etc.

ELS focuses on developing Negotiating and critical thinking skills. In smaller groups students research, discuss and prepare materials for the simulated meetings, debates and negotiations.

While there is no formal assessment for the ELS classes, students are aware that what they do in these classes has a direct impact on their work both in the core modules and the English language modules.

Over both years the close collaboration between the English Language Lecturer and the ELS Teachers, who see the students in smaller groups, is essential, to ensure that the programmes are both complementary and as comprehensive as possible. The English Language Module Lecturer sometimes participates in workshops and classes with the ELS teachers. This not only highlights the fact that all lessons are an integral part of the whole programme² but that the teachers and professors are a team working to achieve common outcomes.

Evaluative comments

(QA questions: What are/were the outcomes? What is/was the impact? Is/was the activity/ initiative successful? How do you know whether or not it works/worked?)

Student feedback has been on the whole very positive, though the number of credits has increased students still complain about the amount of work they have to do for the number of credits awarded. They also comment on how difficult they find the method in the first semester of the first year but by the end of the first year all agree that 'learning by doing' (their way of referring to CLIL) is a very effective approach to learning both language and content. Students appreciated in particular the Year 1 ELS-law course and were very disappointed to find out that this course did not continue into the second semester. Some non-economists asked if a similar course could be organised for the Economics Modules.

While they found this approach very demanding in terms of time and effort, it was both stimulating and rewarding as they saw the benefits both in terms of language improvement and (ostensibly) ability to learn and perform well in their course modules; some said they found by the end of the first semester they were much improved both in understanding and participating in core modules and felt more confident in writing in English by the second semester.

Some indicators of the success are:

- Student attendance (recalling that attendance is not compulsory at Italian universities) is higher than all other modules, in particular in the second year. This may, in part, be due to the fact that it is difficult to learn a language without practising it, in particular the spoken language, However, many of the students are highly motivated and keen to improve their language skills which is a life skill as well as an academic subject.
- The intake has become more international and attracts students from all over Italy (first edition 100% Trento graduates, latest edition only 30% Trento graduates) Student questionnaires revealed that all the International students had chosen Trento because the whole programme was in English and most of the non-Trento Italian students said that they chose Trento over other programmes because they knew that the English language programme was 'serious'.

² Attendance at ELS lessons elsewhere in the university is below 35% as students see them as an optional extra with little relation to the module courses.

Some even spent the summer in the UK as they had heard how difficult the English language entrance test was.³ compared with those in other universities.

- Content professors report increased participation in class, thanks to admission criteria being more strictly adhered to in later editions⁴
- One of the ELS teachers recently commented that the level of language produced by the students at the School was in most cases even better than that produced by students on the MA in Languages for Business and Tourism, where the Admissions requirement is C1 (CEF) and students spend 8-10 contact hours a week on English for two whole academic years. This may, in part be explained by the high degree of motivation of the students at the School, but in part may be due to a wholly different approach (different for the Italian context) to language learning.
- The numerous emails sent by students, current and past, either doing internships or working in international institutions who say they approach their work with greater confidence thanks to the approach.
- Increased motivation of the ELS teachers, despite the extra work: the team teaching with the English Language lecturer and the close collaboration with the module lecturers, rare on other degree programmes, has led to a feeling of greater involvement and greater professional satisfaction.

On the other hand, in particular in the early years of the degree, some problems arose which had to be addressed:

- Doubts were expressed by some Module Lecturers of some disciplines about students' ability to follow courses in English, a problem addressed by stricter admissions requirements
- Some content Lecturers thought students' (poor) language had a negative effect on their performance in assignments and exams, offering students the option of writing/speaking in Italian, if they preferred, though from 2008 this has no longer been possible. One or two refuse to mark poorly written papers, though most say they do not penalise students for weak use of language.
- Doubts over Lecturers' ability to teach effectively in English, on the whole unfounded. Nonetheless, the Law professors organised themselves into a group for ELS, provided by the same teacher who does the ELS-Law classes on the Master's degree. This course not only aimed to develop the English language skills of the professors, but also to highlight which areas of language are most problematic and how they might deal with these in class. This course was rather challenging for the teacher as the level of the professors was far from homogeneous and interests disparate (some wanted to focus on pronunciation, others on lexis, yet others on grammar etc) and issues of power hierarchies amongst the 'learners' were also at play, making the ELS teacher at times feel uncomfortable. This is something ELS teachers are not used to dealing with in courses with students. Nonetheless, the course was deemed a success by all and the participants and was oversubscribed in its third edition.
- Assessment is still seen, with the exception of one Politics lecturer, as the sole prerogative of the Module Professor, though they may ask for input from the English Lecturer⁵. They do not think that any marks should be awarded for language, not least because they see this as the scientific domain of the English Lecturer and are already awarded up to 12 credits for English. Cooperating on forms of assessment and assessment criteria, therefore, remain one area where there is ample room for development.
- Some Lecturers do not understand how the English programme works or how they might

³ It should perhaps be noted that the foreign language requirement to graduate on most Bachelor degree courses in Italy is B1 or below, a requirement many students find it difficult to achieve.

⁴ In previous years applicants who were very strong academically but had failed the English language test by up to 5% were admitted on the condition they would improve their English by the end of the first semester, something they rarely did.

⁵ Paradoxically this happens mainly when the English appears 'too good' to have been written by a non-native and plagiarism is suspected, and only in a few cases when the Lecturer fears the grade might be affected by poor use of language.

benefit from closer cooperation with the English team. An individual, bottom up approach works best here, but with an ever changing academic staff can be time consuming.

- The risk of the Law Lecturers using the ELS course as an adjunct to their own course, to cover aspects they do not have time to cover. A clear definition of roles, objectives, learning outcomes and assessment of the different components is required at the beginning of each academic year, a delicate issue in a very hierarchical context.
- Some students initially prefer a more traditional, passive (grammar + vocabulary driven) approach to studying and find it difficult to adjust to being centre stage in the language learning process, though by the end of the first semester most embrace the more active role expected of them.

Advice to others

The project described above was initiated, and developed, as a response to specific needs in a specific context. Initially, it was not set up as a CLIL project, realisation that it was, at least in part, embracing the CLIL approach to language learning came AFTER the project was set up. The initial impetus came from students, professors and the English Language Lecturer perceiving a real need for this **approach**, i.e. problems perceived at grass roots level, rather than thanks to any higher level policy decisions. However, the problems were a direct consequence of higher level policy decisions – to internationalise not only this degree course, but many of the Master’s courses offered at Trento.

For such a project to work, it is evident is that there needs to be both close and continuous cooperation between all teaching staff (professors, lecturers, language teachers), not least in defining roles and setting aims and objectives. It is likewise essential that the academic and administrative management offer both financial and institutional support. This project would not have been possible if (most of) the School board had not been prepared to listen to what the implications of setting up an English medium Master’s Degree are and provide the necessary resources and support (for example in timetabling) to set up the project and also to address problems as they arose. Elsewhere in the university similar English Medium courses and degrees have been set up with varying degrees of success. Many of the difficulties encountered have been due to a lack of (appropriate) language support. While far from perfect and in need of constant adjustment and tweaking, it is hoped that the project described above will serve as an example of how coordination, cooperation and effective use of resources can indeed make a positive contribution to degree courses taught in English or any other second language(s).

As a final word of warning, however, any language teaching team embarking on such a project has to be aware that it is far more demanding than more traditional EAP and ESP courses and much patience and determination is needed to overcome the frustrations of dealing with administrative obstacles and also a certain reluctance from some quarters to cooperate on a shared programme. This is particularly the case where no clear policy is in place regarding such courses.

Reflection/any other comments

QA question: Is/was that the best way to do it? Why/why not? What improvements or adjustments are needed?

One commonly recurring comment from students regarding feedback is that there is not enough teacher correction during discussion sessions (and even simulations). They feel they should be corrected (interrupted in full flow) more often by language teachers. This may be a reflection of the traditional focus on form found in Italian language classrooms, rather than a greater focus on communicative competence favoured in the approach described above. Indeed, one 90 minute lesson was devoted to debating this issue with the students, at the end of which a couple of students (Italian) still thought that the language teacher’s role is to be that of a grammar police officer. This makes one reflect on how much the national context and learners’ own perceptions, shaped by their experience affects their acceptance of new approaches. The question is raised, however, of whether we should try to accommodate all perceptions of learning in the classroom or impose our own ideas on unwilling students. Since the degree became more ‘international’ these debates have no longer been such an

issue, but even in the latest edition one student asked for more traditional grammar lessons.

With only one or two exceptions, lecturers of other disciplines have thus far not made a request for either ELS or any form of support for themselves.

The attitude of the different faculties towards language learning are very varied, and created not few difficulties at the beginning of the project: some lecturers of Economics questioned whether English Language should be considered a core Module or why resources be 'wasted' on English Language Support. The prevailing belief amongst the Economists seemed to be that the students would pick up the language in the Modules held in English. For them the 'problem' of language was one the student had to resolve alone. Fortunately, most of the other discipline lecturers were convinced of the importance of the English Language Programme and it was approved, otherwise the project would not have been possible. The Economists have since revised their opinions and are introducing ELS to their English medium Master's programmes. I mention this fact to underline how important it is to convince people who have very little notion of what it means to learn a language in terms of resources, efforts and, not least, the importance of the outcomes for students that such a language programme is very deserving of its slice of the funding pie.