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Finding their feet: lecturers' and students' perceptions of English as a Medium of Instruction in a recently-implemented Master's programme at an Italian university

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This article reports on a small-scale qualitative study designed to explore lecturers' and students' experiences of teaching and learning on a recently-implemented MSc programme in Biomedical Sciences taught in the medium of English at an Italian university. A focus group format was employed to interview twelve students on the programme, and individual interviews were conducted with six lecturers. Participants' views were elicited concerning the language proficiency of both students and lecturers, the strategies adopted to meet any challenges associated with weak language skills where these were thought to exist, and the perceived impact of EMI on assessment and the quality of course content. Findings indicate that despite quite lenient language entry requirements, students felt able to cope with the demands of the programme and felt positively disposed towards it and the benefits it afforded, despite at times placing extra demands on them. Lecturers similarly felt positive about the experience both in terms of the students' and their own development. There is evidence that flexible attitudes towards the use of students' L1, and the strategies lecturers adopted in their efforts to accommodate to students, were important determinants of these attitudes and the generally positive experience widely reported.

Keywords: English as a medium of instruction; EMI; EMI in Italy; Lecturer and student experiences of EMI

Introduction

The rapid growth worldwide in the number of higher education courses being offered in the medium of English (EMI) is well documented in the literature (Dearden 2014; Graddol 2006; Doiz, Lasagabaster and Sierra 2011; Wächter and Maiworm 2014). It is a phenomenon that has arisen largely as a result of universities' efforts to engage in 'dramatic transformative processes centred on internationalisation, marketization, competition and standardization' (Hultgren, Jensen and Dimova 2015, 1); processes that can be crucial determinants not merely of their growth but also, potentially, their survival. Offering programmes and courses in English is increasingly seen as an attractive addition to a range of strategies adopted by universities and designed to create opportunities for stakeholders that reflect what Lasagabaster (2015, 255) has referred to as the internationalisation 'mantra' of higher education. These include increased staff and student mobility, research and other collaborations and partnerships with institutions and industry, the development of intercultural competencies (Messelink, Maele and Spencer-Oatey 2015; Volet and Ang 2012), and international knowledge transfer.

In this context, EMI can be an enabler, a means through which students can derive the benefits of an internationalised higher education experience. However, it has not been universally welcomed and concerns expressed over its increasing popularity can be broadly categorised into those that are principle-based and those that are pedagogically-based. In terms of the former, EMI is seen by some as symptomatic of the commodification of tertiary education and the creation of fierce competition for international fee-paying students in what has become a global marketplace (Altbach and Knight 2007). There is scepticism around

universities' motivations and disquiet at the increasingly intimate connection – mutual dependency, even – between the internationalisation agenda with its frequently professed benefits to the student, and the financial imperatives to which universities increasingly find themselves subject. Specifically, there are concerns as to how consistent this is with the principle of striving to maintain educational standards. In commenting on the potential value of study abroad opportunities, particularly in relation to the Bologna Process, Coleman reflects that

... such student-centred impulses have often now been overtaken by a desire to share in the lucrative European and global markets in university students. The phrase 'international students' increasingly means not the 'organized mobility' of mutual exchanges but the 'spontaneous mobility' of fee-paying individuals (2006, 5).

Other reservations expressed over EMI include the threat it poses to the cultural independence, identity, even existence of other speech communities (Phillipson 2006; Shohamy 2006, 2013; Kirkpatrick 2011). Skutnabb-Kangas speaks of languages being 'murdered' as a result of 'brutal market forces' (2001, 201); Hultgren (2013) and Kirkpatrick (2011) of domain loss and reduced academic literacy in students' first languages; and Molino

and Campagna (2014, 165) to unequal access to and/or opportunity in higher education due to those more socioeconomically privileged groups having better English language skills, resulting in a form of ‘natural selection’, with the best students attending English-medium programmes.

It is, however, with the pedagogical issues that arise in the process of implementing EMI policy that this article is primarily concerned. The literature is replete with reports of hasty adoption and haphazard planning of EMI courses imposed top-down by tertiary institutional policymakers who lack sufficient understanding of the operational complexities involved and the implications for the primary and secondary education sectors (Airey 2011; Werther, Denver, Jensen, and Mees 2014; Soruç and Griffiths 2017). Moreover, as Dearden and Macaro (2016) have noted, EMI policies can often lack transparency, appropriate levels of administrative support and clear criteria regarding the selection of subjects or teachers involved in the delivery of courses. Concerns have similarly been expressed over institutions ‘experimenting with instruction in a foreign language’ (Simonsen 2005, 262), and academics and students complaining of ‘falling standards of learning on account of poor language skills’ and even ‘falling standards of English’ (Mauranen, Hynninen, and Ranta 2010, 187).

This concern over the potentially detrimental effects of poor language skills on the quality of EMI programmes, and by extension educational standards, is a recurring theme in the literature (Cots 2013; Doiz, Lasagabaster, and Sierra 2011; Murray 2016). Byun, Chu, Kim, Park, Kim, and Jung (2011, 431) speak of the effects of ‘compulsory enforcement of EMI without regard to students'/instructors' language proficiency’, while as early as 1998,

Vinke, Snippe and Jochem recommended that lecturers be screened to assess their command of English, and receive any support deemed necessary. To date, however, there exists no standardised proficiency benchmark test for subject teachers (Dearden and Macaro 2016; Klaassen and Räsänen 2006). In their study on lecturers' and students' perceptions of EMI in a Spanish University, Aguilar and Rodriguez (2012) report that lecturers' proficiency falls short of student expectations and their desire to be exposed to rich language input. In describing their own perceptions of the challenges of using English as the medium of instruction, lecturers have reported limited stylistic variety (Dafouz-Milne and Núñez Perucha 2010; Thøgersen and Airey 2011), resulting in long monologues, limited interaction and ability to use humour or anecdotes, and thus student boredom and lack of motivation (Klaassen and De Graaf (2001). Vinke et al (1998, 391) highlight the impact of weak English on effective content delivery, including insufficient coverage of material – what Jensen, Denver, Mees and Werther (2013, 88) refer to as 'content loss' – in terms of both volume and complexity, as a result of reduced speech rate and 'limitations in the field of vocabulary, redundancy, and clarity and accuracy of expression'.

In terms of student language proficiency, the literature makes frequent reference to students struggling to negotiate course content delivered in English and of the implications for admissions criteria and processes, educational rigour, provision of in-session English language support, and the role and professional development of academic staff. Belhiah and Elhami (2015, 3), for example, speak of students 'struggling to learn subject matter due to their low-proficiency in English', and Soruç and Griffiths (2017, 8-9) of their having no idea

of 'the enormity of the task' [of learning in English] and becoming discouraged, demotivated, 'shy, embarrassed, anxious, uncomfortable, or bored'. Bradford (2016) highlights the difficulties teachers face as a result of diverse student proficiency levels, and their fear of alienating students with more advanced English skills if they focus their teaching on those less proficient. Shaw, Benson, Brunsberg, Druhs, and Minugh (2008) and Airey (2015) report that student questions to teachers are fewer and simpler when English is used, which may negatively impact the acquisition of academic content. Meanwhile, Pulcini and Campagna (2015) speak of 'students' memorization of terminology and set phrases without the capability of elaborating on contents with an adequate linguistic richness and complexity' (op. cit., 73).

Where language issues arise, there is evidence to suggest that lecturers see their role primarily as transmitting content rather than supporting students' language development. Dearden and Macaro (2016, 473) report no indication of teachers 'feeling any sense of responsibility for improving their students' English', despite being aware of its potential to inhibit learning. This suggests a failure to see language as intimately involved in the construction of knowledge, as well as a tendency to compartmentalise language and content (Gleeson 2015) and to view disciplinary discourse 'simply as a glossary of specialised terms rather than a meaning-making system' (Dafouz, Camocho and Urquia 2014, 233). Furthermore, according to Ball and Lindsay (2012, 49), lecturers do not share or are unaware of the view that teaching in another language may require a greater focus on methodology and the particular pedagogical skills required to teach content effectively in another language

without compromising educational quality (Shohamy 2013; Klaassen and De Graaf 2001; Cots 2013).

While the literature reflects varying degrees of institutional support for lecturers teaching through the medium of English, a key obstacle to its effective implementation can be staff reluctance to attend methodology training due to lack of time, awareness of the issues or unwillingness to participate in EMI programmes (Shaw et al. 2008; Björkman 2010; Costa and Coleman 2013). Yang (2015) meanwhile draws attention to the concentration required to deal with both communication problems and content learning simultaneously.

In contrast to these findings, other research suggests that language issues do not cause significant difficulties for students or staff. An empirical study of first-year students studying history, finance and accounting at Madrid's Complutense University, for example, compared the course outcomes of EMI courses and the equivalent courses taught in Spanish. The researchers concluded that EMI 'does not seem to affect negatively students' academic performance as evidenced in course work and final exam results' (Dafouz et al. 2014, 233) and urged EMI course programmes to provide empirical evidence of student results in terms of content learning in order to avoid 'a priori judgements which often view foreign languages as a 'problem' rather than an opportunity'. Similarly, findings from Joe and Lee's (2013) study designed to test Korean medical students' understanding of lectures, reported that EMI had little or no negative impact, although over 50% of students reported the course as less satisfying than an L1 course.

EMI in Italy

Although a feature of Italian higher education as early as 1992, EMI became more prominent from 2004 (Helm and Guarda 2015). University (2017) reports 56 universities offering 338 EMI courses, the overwhelming majority at Master's level. The Italian context differs from those of other Central and Northern European countries in that, according to the European Commission (2012), only 38% of Italians believe they can speak another language well enough to converse in it, compared to an average of 54% in the EU. In 2010, an Italian law on education (Legge Gelmini 240/2010) aimed to address this situation by seeking to improve language learning in schools, including the mandating of one academic subject being taught in English in the final year of secondary education. Furthermore, as part of a bid to modernise higher education through greater internationalisation, it encouraged the establishment of degree programmes taught in a foreign language in order to attract international students and improve domestic students' knowledge of other languages (Costa and Coleman 2013). However, in that same article, Costa and Coleman reported that for 30% of universities, the greatest barrier to the implementation of EMI was insufficient levels of English language competency among students and lecturers. Helm and Guarda, meanwhile, identified language competence as a significant issue among staff, although this was in part mitigated by the fact that lecturers demonstrated a greater awareness of methodological issues and a perceived need for training.

In an overview of EMI in Italy, Costa (2017, 87), concludes that although EMI is ‘highly complex and certainly growing’, only recently has attention has been paid to ‘adequately regulating and planning EMI’.

The study

The small-scale qualitative study we report on here adds to the existing EMI literature by exploring, via a qualitative methodological approach, lecturers’ and students’ experience of EMI within the particular context of a newly-implemented Master’s programme delivered at an Italian university. Its small scale facilitates a comparison of lecturers’ and students’ perceptions of a shared experience of a single programme; in particular, their respective views on the language demands of the programme, the strategies adopted to overcome any language difficulties experienced, the use of the students’ first language (L1), and the impact of EMI on course content and assessment.

The following research questions underpinned the study:

1. What are lecturers’ and students’ perceptions concerning the adequacy of their own and each other’s English language proficiency?
2. What measures, if any, do lecturers adopt in their attempt to address any shortcomings in students’ language proficiency?

3. How do lecturers and students feel EMI impacts on assessment and the quality of the course?

Context and Participants

The study focused on a recently-implemented (October 2015) Master's degree in Biomedical Sciences at a state university, taught in the medium of English and previously delivered in Italian. This shift to English was in response to a call from the University to introduce EMI into teaching programmes as part of its internationalisation agenda and because of the financial incentives offered by the Italian government. The Master's is a two-year course comprising lectures in year one and laboratory-based work in year two, on which the students' dissertations are based. Assessment is ostensibly carried out in English, although there is a somewhat flexible attitude towards students' having recourse to Italian in instances where they struggle to express themselves in English. The official language entry requirement for direct entry onto the course is a C1 on the Common European Framework of Reference. Students unable to provide certification of this are admitted to the course on condition that they attend a two-week pre-session course in English for Science. Beyond the pre-session, no further subject-related language support is provided. Lecturers teaching on the programme receive no English language training or support and are not required to demonstrate a certified level of language competence; nor have they undergone specific training for teaching their subject through the medium of English.

Methodology

Two student focus groups were formed, one comprising six students from the first intake (in their second year of study and hitherto referred to as ‘second year students’ or S7-12) and the other six from the second intake (in their first year of study and referred to as ‘first year students’ or S1-6). Together, these 12 students accounted for 38% of the entire MSc cohort and had no previous experience of EMI. While there were no international students in the first intake, in the second there were two, both of whom were reported as having a ‘sound’ level of English and Italian.

Six of the fourteen lecturers responsible for teaching modules on the MSc took part in the study, five females and one male aged between 35 and 55, only one of whom was a non-native speaker of Italian. Four participants had taught on the programme in the previous year and two were experiencing it for the first time in the academic year the study was conducted (2016-17).

Given the relatively small sample size of 18 participants (12 students and 6 lecturers), a single method interpretive qualitative format of semi-structured interviews was deemed to be the most suitable, effective and convenient way to gain a rich source of data from which to subsequently explore emergent issues and themes as it also afforded participants the opportunity to elaborate on points they considered significant and to bring up issues not raised by the interviewer.

A set of guiding questions and prompts was prepared with the aim of gaining a detailed picture of participants’ teaching and learning experience on the programme. The

major themes included perceived challenges around the use of English, strategies employed for teaching more effectively through the medium of English, marking and performance in exams, the perceived need for extra English language support, and a consideration of the benefits and opportunities afforded by EMI. The interviews focussed only on participants' experience of the taught first year of the programme rather than on the laboratory-based work carried out in the second year, although occasional reference was made to this.

Data collection and analysis

The decision was made to conduct the student focus group interviews in Italian due to the limited time available (45 minutes) and to encourage participation by those who might otherwise be shy to speak in English and/or have lower levels of proficiency. Lecturers were interviewed individually and given the choice of speaking in Italian or English; all opted for English. All interviews were recorded on an mp3 digital recorder and fully transcribed. Those conducted in Italian were translated by one of the researchers, who is fluent in Italian.

Initial coding was done by both researchers (the authors) independently to identify relevant emergent themes and the results recorded using One Note software. As data analysis progressed, themes were reconciled and merged to arrive at the main categories considered most salient to the research questions. Headings were created within each category and formed the basis for the analysis of our results. In relation specifically to the construct of language proficiency, the data were analysed based on a traditional division between receptive skills (listening and reading) and productive skills (writing and speaking) in order

to give greater focus to the analysis and to explore whether there was any perceptible difference in the challenges presented by receptive versus productive skills.

Results

- *What are lecturers' and students' perceptions of the adequacy of their own and each other's English language proficiency?*

Students' language proficiency

Although stipulated as C1, the fact that in Italy the average proficiency level of students in higher education is between B1 and B2 (Clark 2018; Francomacaro 2011) led the university to show flexibility in its gatekeeping practices and take students at sub-C1 level in order to help ensure the viability of the course. The fact that all students in the MSc cohort attended the pre-sessionals suggests that the requirement for a C1 level was not, anyway, met by the majority of students. While one might question the adequacy of a two-week pre-sessionals course in preparing students for their studies, it was notable, nonetheless, that students found it 'very helpful' and lecturers stated that only a minority struggled with language on the MSc.

Receptive skills. All students felt that the use of English did not impair their ability to understand course content delivery and felt that this may be due, in part, to the fact that their teachers are non-native speakers of English with more familiar accents and intonation.

However, several comments emerged at a later stage in the student focus group interview

suggesting that they were not fully confident in their ability to understand some aspects of lectures, with some participants reporting that use of the L1 sometimes facilitated their understanding of more complex concepts and citing the practice of recording and listening to lectures several times – something they would not normally do for lectures delivered in their first language. Although two lecturers corroborated students' comments regarding anxiety around understanding content whilst simultaneously taking notes, there was, nonetheless, general agreement that for the most part listening did not represent a major challenge for students. Three lecturers reported difficulty determining whether instances of non-comprehension by students were language or content related (see also Murray & McConachy 2018), and one lecturer felt that some students were translating from English to their first language, thereby increasing their cognitive processing load.

Students reported no difficulties with reading journals and textbooks in English and the consensus was that they preferred reading authentic rather than simplified or abridged material. One student stated, however, that understanding a new concept in written English 'takes a bit longer and you have to read a sentence more than once' (S10). While lecturers agreed that, for the most part, students appeared to cope well with reading demands, one suggested that students with weaker English, coupled with a weaker background in science, could sometimes struggle with the extensive reading required on the MSc.

Productive skills. Responses regarding writing skills focused primarily on written examinations, with students reporting no particular concerns, mainly due to the fact that lecturers had reassured them that they would not be penalized for poor English. One student

stated, 'I'm sure I made grammatical mistakes, but they didn't take anything off' (S8). Meanwhile, lecturers' perceptions of students' written English were varied, with some describing it as 'good' and others as 'insufficient' in some cases (L3). These diverging opinions could be due to differing written exam formats including multiple choice questions, long-answer questions (up to 3 pages in one case), and short questions (3 or 4 sentences). Most reported that the majority of students were able to answer adequately, albeit in some cases with grammatical and spelling errors. However, one lecturer recounted having to ask one particularly weak student to explain his answers orally as his writing skills were so poor that it was 'a challenge to understand if he properly understood the content or not' (L3).

Students identified speaking as their weakest language skill, with one stating that he could express an idea in a 'thousand different ways'(S4) in Italian but only in two or three ways in English, which limited his powers of expression. Both groups mentioned that they sometimes struggled to find the right word or term and had to think of 'different ways of getting round the obstacle' (S3). Surprisingly, they did not consider this weakness an impediment to effective participation in the course or oral exams. They appeared keen to use the course as a vehicle to improve their spoken English and believed that oral exams provided an excellent opportunity to practise their speaking skills as they 'are obliged to talk'(S6). Although one student felt that language obstacles directly affected his ability to interact during classes ('I find it hard to express myself, so I hold back a bit' (S4)), the majority felt that where speaking difficulties existed, they did not compromise their level of classroom interaction; nonetheless, they welcomed the possibility of using their L1 where necessary. As

one student explained, 'If we needed to say something and the subject was a bit more difficult, we spoke in Italian' (S12).

Due to their already heavy workload, none of the first-year students felt that improving their language proficiency via additional extra-curricular English language support classes was a priority; although one second year student did express a desire for further speaking practice.

All lecturers agreed that the majority of students were 'capable of communicating in English in a way that you can understand, even if they have some grammatical errors' (L1). However, they universally agreed that students needed more practice in order to gain confidence in preparation for oral exams. They all cited students' high motivation in their preparation of planned speaking activities, such as in-class presentations and discussion of journal articles, and expressed satisfaction – and some surprise – at the generally good level of student performance in English in oral exams. One lecturer commented: 'I thought it would be difficult for them to cope with the exam. Instead it was quite good'(L3).

In terms of spontaneous student-teacher interaction during lectures, of the two lecturers who did not revert to Italian, one believed that interaction was impaired due to student difficulties with asking questions. The other noted that although students rarely spontaneously ask questions or start discussions; this was not necessarily a direct consequence of EMI as students were also reluctant to ask questions on other courses delivered in Italian. She believed, nonetheless, that English 'worsens the situation. It's another obstacle to ask questions' (L3).

Lecturers' language proficiency

Students' perceptions. All students felt satisfied with the language proficiency of their lecturers, with the exception of one lecturer in relation to whom students complained of a lack of comprehension due to poor pronunciation and their resultant inability to 'put everything together' (S9). They reported that the lecturer had switched to Italian during the lessons and that they had agreed with this decision 'otherwise it would have been really difficult to follow the concept' (S9). Notwithstanding this lecturer, students described lecturers' proficiency level as 'on average, extremely high' (S2), adding that lecturers were able to deliver clear, interesting lectures with no significant differences from lectures delivered in Italian in terms of speed of delivery and spontaneity. Only one student noted that when concepts were complex to explain 'even for the lecturers, it sometimes became a bit tricky' (S11).

Lecturers' perceptions of their own proficiency. The majority of the lecturers felt quite confident in their own levels of language proficiency, although they recognised that there was room for improvement. One (L4) reported experiencing few limitations when discussing science but greater difficulty when using general English. Another spoke of the need to prepare her lectures extensively, even rehearsing her English explanations so she could 'better understand [her] limitations' (L2).

Only one lecturer mentioned experiencing more significant challenges when delivering lectures in English. She reported that her lack of fluency resulted in her lessons

being less ‘warm’ and more ‘direct’(L5), with a heavy reliance on slides. In an attempt to compensate for this, she dedicated 15 minutes at the end of each lecture to discussion and a comprehension check in Italian. Despite a much-increased workload associated with the preparation of lessons delivered in English, she was extremely positive about her experience, describing it as an opportunity for professional development and improving her own English – a sentiment shared by her colleagues all of whom were happy to deliver the programme in English, with four stating that it was easier because they did not have to translate articles and vocabulary.

- *What measures, if any, do lecturers adopt in their attempt to address any shortcomings in student language proficiency?*

The students unanimously felt that it is not the role of lecturers to help them with English. One remarked, ‘If I don’t understand something in English it’s my problem, it’s not the teacher’s ... If I don’t understand, it’s up to me to work at it’ (S3). This sentiment was mirrored by the lecturers, who saw themselves as neither responsible for nor capable of helping students improve their English skills as they were not trained English language teachers. Yet, despite feeling unqualified, most reported adopting particular strategies to make their students feel more ‘comfortable’ with using English. All expressed a desire to help improve students’ confidence in their ability to do the course, with one commenting that ‘we speak slowly, we try to involve them in the conversation’ (L1), and another citing her

attempts to respond to students' initial nervousness by reassuring them that mastery of content, not English, is her main concern.

Similarly, all lecturers aimed to make their Powerpoint slides as clear as possible, with most uploading them prior to the lesson in order to give students the chance to preview its contents. One lecturer stated: 'I probably put a bit more text on my figures now so that if they miss what I'm saying they sort of have the key words to follow'(L1). All lecturers invited students to interrupt if something was not clear and several of them mentioned doing frequent content checks and summarising key points. In response to the need for students to gain speaking practice, three teachers reported having introduced a 'Journal Club' where students were assigned journal articles to present and discuss with the class– a 'new initiative to discuss and interact in English' and to give students the opportunity to practise their speaking skills, while two lecturers periodically asked students to deliver a 20-minute presentation in class.

For their part, the students described their lecturers as always 'helpful' and willing to explain any words or difficult concepts, in Italian where necessary.

Use of Italian

There are no clear guidelines issued to lecturers regarding their use of Italian during lectures and examinations; consequently, there was some variation in whether and how lecturers employed the practice. Of the six lecturers interviewed, two stated that they never used Italian during lessons but allowed students to ask them questions in Italian during breaks or after

classes. The remaining lecturers used Italian to varying degrees but primarily to make certain that students fully understood key concepts. Most teachers reported being alert to visual signs of non-comprehension, particularly where complex ideas were concerned. One lecturer commented: ‘I tried to explain in English but sometimes the look on their face means they are not following you, so I switched in Italian’ (L2).

Mirroring the lecturers’ perspective, students were similarly favourably disposed to the use of some Italian in lectures, especially in the case of difficult subjects or concepts:

If the teacher explained everything to us all in English, it would perhaps be slower for the teacher and take us longer to understand it; so if there is a complex concept it’s better if they explain it to us in Italian. (S4)

The issue of L1 use also arose in connection with assessment, to which we turn next.

How do lecturers and students feel EMI impacts on assessment and the quality of the course content?

Each lecturer is free to decide on the most appropriate way to assess students at the end of each module, and exams may be written, oral or a combination of the two. All lecturers stated that they were sensitive to the language challenges examination conditions can present for students, and while they encouraged the use English as much as possible, the

majority stated openly that they allowed recourse to Italian in cases where students were unable to express themselves clearly. One lecturer explained her approach as follows:

If I think I something they say doesn't sound right I try to have them explain it some other way and if they cannot manage to explain it in English, I have them explain it in Italian. (L2)

All lecturers reported that they did not penalize students for poor English and, in line with this, the students were confident that 'obviously the thing that is being assessed is subject knowledge rather than knowledge of English'(S2). However, three lecturers stated that they may award a marginally higher mark for 'good English'. Most lecturers believed that students' underperformance in exams was generally due to poor subject knowledge rather than an inability to express themselves satisfactorily, although it is difficult to know how secure this claim is given that they also expressed difficulty in determining whether poor task performance is a result of weak English or the complexity of content per se. One lecturer stated emphatically that exam marks were 'absolutely not' (L4) affected by their use of English, and another that although 'some of them explain in a more simple manner, they are, nevertheless, able to express what they wish to communicate'(L6). Having checked individual students' exam results on their previous BSc (delivered in Italian), one lecturer suggested that they indicated no significant difference in performance level compared to the MSc grades achieved – an observation consistent with that of Dafouz et al. (2014).

One lecturer explained how she tried not to take students' English into consideration when marking exams but at the same time was aware that 'if you are very secure what you are saying, you use good expressions and so on; it increases the quality of your performance' (L3). She went on to state that a slow, hesitant exposition can negatively impact performance and voiced concern that some students with lower levels of language proficiency were unable to express more complex concepts orally or deal with questions spontaneously – something alluded to by another lecturer who referred to some students freezing when asked unexpected questions and who expressed the belief that Master's-level students should be able to 'elaborate' (L4) on information rather than just repeat it. For this reason, she was keen to expand discursive oral activities in her courses.

Only one student reported finding examinations more stressful due to the use of English. Most believed that with sufficient language practice and good exam preparation they could negotiate their demands successfully. Furthermore, they felt more secure and less anxious in the knowledge that if they experienced significant difficulties in explaining concepts in English, they would be permitted to use Italian in some instances. The students were unanimous, therefore, in believing that doing the exams in English did not adversely affect their results. When asked if they thought they would have scored higher marks had they done the exams in Italian, the general feeling was 'not so different, maybe one mark more'(S8).

Students' perceptions of the quality-of course content

The students were universally of the view that delivering courses in English actually enhanced rather than compromised the learning experience. They reported that the course 'was done very well', was 'really complete'(S11), 'covered a lot of ground, from more basic to specialised'(S1), and did not sacrifice the quality or quantity of content covered; this is in line with Clark (2018), who reports that all 75 respondents to an online survey felt that their proficiency level did not negatively affect learning outcomes. One student felt that the course had 'enriched' them and they all agreed that they would 'without a doubt' (S8) make the same choice again and recommend the course to other students. When probed regarding any possible lack of understanding of concepts, students were confident that this was not the case, particularly as lecturers would explain things in Italian if and where necessary. Furthermore, they felt they gained more exposure to technical terms that would be important for them in the future.

Lecturers' perceptions of the quality of course content

All lecturers believed that the use of EMI did not lead to any significant reduction in the quality and quantity of the course compared to courses delivered in Italian. One lecturer commented: 'I don't modify the content because I think that with the material I give them they can understand everything' (L4).

Another lecturer reported that she did not reduce content but had to 'make an effort to convey the meaning' (L6). She was also aware that maintaining parity with L1 courses in

terms of content rigour can require more effort from both teachers and students. One of her colleagues, meanwhile, felt that the use of English actually facilitates content delivery as English is more direct than Italian (L2).

Discussion

Although much of the literature reports language proficiency as the main drawback to EMI in Italy, our data indicate that despite not necessarily having an advanced level of English, students regarded their language proficiency as sufficient to meet the demands of the course. While the lecturers interviewed similarly felt that the majority of students were generally able to participate in the course effectively, some did express concerns over a minority of students with lower levels of language competence, leading to difficulties for students and staff, particularly when combined with a poor grasp of subject knowledge.

It is interesting to consider why the participants in our study, particularly the students, did not see language proficiency as a major issue. It may be that, in line with reports in the literature (e.g. Dearden and Macaro 2016; Pulcini and Campagna 2015), lecturers' expectations are not particularly high due to the widespread belief that English competence is less critical in more technical disciplines. This may, in part, explain their primary concern with mastery of content and their tendency not to penalize poor English but to demonstrate a tolerance of grammatical and other infelicities so long as students are able to demonstrate their understanding of content and use appropriate scientific terminology. What was highlighted by some lecturers, however, was the difficulty, reported by Murray and

McConachy (2018), of determining whether lack of comprehension is due to language deficiencies, failure to understand concepts and ideas, or other factors. The fact that one lecturer checked the records of students' undergraduate marks for courses delivered in Italian, indicates a level of curiosity to understand the impact of EMI on learning outcomes.

Costa's (2017) pre-course EMI feasibility study highlights students' initial belief, often, that English will hinder the learning process, and their reluctance to be assessed in English. Our data show that the lecturers were not only cognizant of these concerns but also keen to dispel students' initial anxiety by reassuring them of the primacy of content over form and to demonstrate a degree of flexibility around the use of Italian. Furthermore, it became evident that, as time passed, students' concerns began to recede. Allowing them to resort to Italian may be considered by some as an important element in ensuring the maintenance of academic standards by enabling a fuller understanding of subject content (Kirpatrick 2014). The lecturers in our study were not subject to rigid guidelines around its use and drawing on Italian was seen as a natural response to any perceived lack of comprehension during lectures or oral examinations. Notably, however, those lecturers who did not use Italian in their lectures did revert to doing so outside of lectures in an effort to ensure that students acquired a sufficient grasp of course material. Both lecturers and students appeared to regard its use as a safety net, one that also helped reduce student anxiety and contribute to positive attitudes towards the course. Contrary to the findings of Ackerton (2017, 276), who reports that 70.2% out of 111 respondents did not agree with the statement "I would prefer my teacher to use Italian for some explanations", all students interviewed in

our study saw the use of Italian in a generally positive light. Importantly, its judicious use did not appear to detract from the commitment by both parties to the use of English or from the belief that the use of English as the medium of instruction gave added value to the course; indeed, students saw it as offering enhanced future employment prospects, and lecturers as an opportunity for their own professional development.

Although students and lecturers were unanimous in their belief that they were not responsible for students' English language development and that their role lay in imparting subject content, (see also Dafouz et al. 2014), the lecturers in our study demonstrated sensitivity to students' language challenges by adopting strategies such as repetition, summarising, concept checks, the provision of clear slides, and a more reflective disposition towards their lectures in an effort to improve the presentation of complex concepts so as to make them more comprehensible. Despite Pulcini and Campagna's concern that EMI may lead to 'watered-down, simplified presentations of highly complex, academic contents'¹ (2015, 73), lecturers expressed the belief that any simplification, in fact, led to more effective and streamlined lessons rather than a 'dumbing down' of content.

In an attempt to respond to students' need to practise speaking skills and build up their confidence in preparation for oral exams, lecturers had begun to introduce greater interactivity in the form of journal clubs and student presentations, suggesting a willingness to move away from the more teacher-fronted delivery style typical of Italian universities (Costa & Coleman 2013, Francomacaro, 2011) and to experiment with new approaches in an

effort to meet the challenges of EMI. As Guarda and Helm (2016) note, such strategies are likely to be pivotal to the perceived success of the introduction of EMI at university.

Conclusion

While the findings of our study may not necessarily be generalisable to other university contexts within and outside of Italy, and although the views expressed may not be wholly representative of the entire Biomedical Sciences MSc cohort, they nonetheless offer some interesting insights and raise intriguing questions that warrant further investigation.

One key finding concerns the use of the L1 by learners. There is a quite flexible attitude to errors in English and to students using Italian on occasions where communication difficulties arise, and this appears to be a significant factor in students feeling comfortable with EMI and, somewhat paradoxically perhaps, feeling less anxious and more confident in using English and perhaps more willing to move out of their comfort zone, engage with new methods of teaching that may arise from the switch to EMI, and embrace opportunities to practise their spoken English. Over time, this is likely to lead to reduced dependency on their mother tongue, suggesting that a less radical, transitional view of English in EMI contexts may well be the most practical and ultimately productive to adopt. Some use of Italian enabled lecturers in our study to feel more confident that students had understood course content and that educational standards were being met. It also helped render lessons more engaging for those lecturers with lower proficiency levels and who were aware that their

lessons were less “warm” and more direct as a result and who otherwise found that they had to rely heavily on slides (Francomacaro, 2011).

However, while this flexible approach would appear to offer a number of benefits in linguistically homogeneous contexts, in heterogeneous ones it is more problematic. In such contexts, the need for lecturers to engage in professional development that enables them to adjust language and content to ensure comprehensibility is surely greater. Despite no formal training, delivering the curriculum in English encouraged our lecturers to reflect on their pedagogy and develop strategies that they felt enriched their teaching in ways that could benefit all students. This may explain the students’ unanimous view that the course was enhanced through being taught in English. However, the generally positive disposition towards EMI displayed by participants in our study cannot be taken as representative, for it is inevitably a product of multiple factors that will vary according to context and which include the previous EMI experience of staff and students, expectations around and attitudes towards use of the L1, the subject being studied and the degree to which it is ‘literacy-heavy’, the language competence of students and staff, and the existence and extent of any L1 diversity.

Our findings indicate that EMI is more time-consuming for students in terms of reading course material and listening to lecture recordings multiple times, and therefore more suited perhaps to students able to cope with a heavier workload and with a firmer grasp of subject matter and the motivation, ability, and adaptability needed to respond to the pressures it presents. It is also likely to be more time-consuming for lecturers, and this should perhaps be taken into account when calculating their workloads and in decision-making around

professional development (especially adaptation of methodology and content) and the provision of administrative support where necessary.

Overall, despite occasional linguistic challenges faced by lecturers and students, the MSc programme appears to be a successful iteration of EMI that is unanimously supported by both groups and, far from being detrimental, appears to have facilitated students' learning and promoted lecturers' professional development.

Notes

1. It is notable that despite voicing this reservation, Pulcini and Campagna report lecturers' favourable perceptions of EMI for the teaching of technical subjects.

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