

# **English Support to Academic Staff**

## **A Pilot Study at the Department of Management**

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**Abstract** The internationalisation of Universities is a global phenomenon that has an impact on teaching and administrative staff, who, as a result of top-down decisions are required to perform their tasks in another language, usually English. Given that this process often leads to concerns regarding the quality of services and teaching, more research is needed to better analyse potential issues. Therefore, this project seeks to investigate the main linguistic and methodological difficulties experienced by the teaching and administrative staff in an Italian university when English is the medium of instruction and communication. The Department of Management at Ca' Foscari University of Venice has instituted a pilot project running from November 2015 to May 2016, in which linguistic support is provided to the academic staff, in the form of a language help desk. To understand the specific needs of the department, diary entries of help desk activities were analysed through the lens of Grounded Theory. Initial results indicate that less proficient users would ask for a revision of some grammar points, while more proficient users would prefer having their articles and slides proofread, or rehearsing their lessons.

**Summary** 1 Introduction. – 2 Literature Review. – 2.1 Linguistic Difficulties in EMI. – 2.2 Lack of Support in EMI Implementation. – 2.3 Institutional Response. – 3 The Present Study: The Ca' Foscari Department of Management. – 4 Methodology. – 5 Data collection. – 6 Discussion of findings. – 7 Conclusions.

**Keywords** English-Medium Instruction (EMI). English as a Lingua Franca (ELF). Teacher Education. Language Support Service. Internationalisation.

## **1 Introduction**

The stimuli to internationalise universities are not only of educational or geographical nature, but also political and economical (cf. Coleman 2006). The main drives of this phenomenon are the desire to acquire international recognition, attract foreign students and professors, create more partnerships with other institutions and companies (Wilkinson 2013, 8), as well as multiply the possibilities for receiving external funding. Considered all together, these factors would help improve a university's position in global rankings, a crucial element in establishing a renowned reputation:

The combination of higher individual fees, greater student mobility, and

excess of supply over demand has accentuated the market character of HE [Higher Education]: the student has become the customer. Universities are no longer institutions but brands. (Coleman 2006, 3)

In light of this phenomenon, the objective of this study is to analyse one of the main consequences of internationalisation: the enormous increase of English Medium Instruction programs all over the world, especially in the formerly linguistically diverse European tertiary education (for a list, cf. IIE 2013). This trend has had an impact on how universities organise their courses, how lecturers teach in their disciplines, and on how students learn the content of the courses.

For the purposes of this study, English Medium Instruction, or EMI, refers to both a language policy insisting on the use of English and a setting in which instruction is transmitted through the English language. While EMI is frequently associated with the concept of Content and Language Integrated learning, or CLIL, Strotmann et al. (2014) describe a subtle, though meaningful, difference between these two approaches. Through the use of authentic materials and pedagogical tools in English, the main goal of EMI resides in the transmission of content knowledge, assuming that the acquisition of English is implicit. In CLIL programs, instead, learning is a much more integrated process since students are more explicitly guided in their language learning with courses having both content and language objectives. Another difference lies in the fact that, while EMI promotes the use of English only, CLIL can be applied to develop also the use of languages other than English (Coyle, Hood & Marsh 2010). While research in both CLIL and EMI has informed the direction of this study, the specific context to be analysed here is purely EMI.

As it stands, numerous studies highlight the benefits for students in EMI programs at all levels of education, with a large portion citing higher learner motivation to master both language and content. At the high school level, for instance, Nikula (2007) presents the case of a Finnish classroom in which students willingly chose to speak in English between themselves during class time, even when not compelled to do so by the teacher. At the university level, Doiz, Lasagabaster and Sierra (2011) observed that students studying through EMI in Spain tend to attend class more often, are more likely to go to their professors' office hours, and send more emails asking for clarification on points discussed in class. While not focusing on the students' linguistic progress or content mastery, these observations certainly indicate the potential that EMI has for inspiring classroom learning.

Despite many reported positive effects of EMI, some of which have been described above, a number of problems remains unaddressed (cf. Dearden 2015, 3), especially at the tertiary level. Very often, the top-down decisions of Higher Education Institutions (HEI) result in a push for the rapid internationalisation of departments and a greater presence

of English, without consideration for the consequences such a process could beget (Byun et al. 2011). In Italy, the Politecnico of Milan represents an emblematic case, revealing how extreme and sudden this push can be. The Rector of this university decided in 2012 that, starting from the academic year 2014-15, all master and doctoral courses offered by the university would be taught only in English.<sup>1</sup> Members of the teaching staff immediately protested against this decision, and eventually appealed to the regional law court, which rejected the English-only language policy and restored the previous one (for a more detailed explanation, cf. Pulcini & Campagna 2015, 69-70). As this case shows, a strong backlash from lecturers is one of the potential issues that could arise when a foreign language is instituted as the main language of learning and communication. Given the often rapid transition to English-taught programs, lecturers involved in the change struggle to acquire the necessary language proficiency to avoid watering down the content of their courses (cf. Coleman 2006).

Vu and Burns (2014) echo this concern in their study of Vietnamese lecturers, two years into a new EMI program. Interviews with these lecturers revealed that code-switching between English and Vietnamese was a common practice when they wanted to make sure students could understand important concepts. Just as Coleman (2006) described, these Vietnamese lecturers also felt their English proficiency was insufficient for teaching effectively, and thus requested didactic support from their university.

It is against this backdrop that this project has collected data on the potential difficulties encountered by the academic and administrative staff at the Department of Management at Ca' Foscari University in Venice, Italy, currently in a phase of internationalisation. Guided by research on new English-taught programs in other countries, this study uses Grounded Theory to analyse these difficulties and develop tailored solutions to assist this department's transition to EMI.

## 2 Literature Review

As mentioned above, several studies have analysed the learner experience in EMI, but lecturers' difficulties and the challenge of finding staff who possess a high level of competence both in their disciplines and in the foreign language are generally mentioned only as peripheral issues (Shohamy 2013, 203). In order to fill the paucity in current research on lecturers' experiences in new EMI contexts, several researchers have

1 The news as reported in a BBC article, dating back to 16/05/2012: URL <http://www.bbc.com/news/business-17958520> (2016-04-12).

tried to consider students' evaluations of courses, in relation to linguistic and didactic issues expressed by lecturers. Despite the diversity of the situations presented in these studies, many reveal surprisingly similar results. Indeed, three main themes consistently appear in the literature: the linguistic problems experienced while teaching in a foreign language, a lack of training in EMI, and a reaction to the institutional response to these problems (Byun et al. 2011; Costa & Coleman 2012; Hu & Lei 2014; Vu & Burns 2014). In the following sections, research in these areas is illustrated and applications to the current study are discussed.

## 2.1 Linguistic Difficulties in EMI

One of the most evident pitfalls that can arise from EMI implementation stems from linguistic deficiencies of the teaching and administrative staff, as highlighted by numerous case studies and experiments conducted around the world. Even though Helm (s.d.) points out that, given its recent development, very little research has been done thus far on EMI in the Italian context, studies conducted in a myriad of other contexts provides a wealth of information that is pertinent to this study.

The Asian context is of particular interest for this study, given that, as in Italy, EMI is still relatively in many Asian countries, too, with problems comparable to those faced by other European countries years ago (The Observatory on Borderless Higher Education 2007). For example, Korea University presents a situation where students have to take a number of courses in English as a graduation requirement, and new professors have to deliver all courses in English as a condition for their hiring (Byun et al. 2011). From an institutional perspective, the results of these policies seem positive: more foreign students are enrolling and researchers are beginning to publish in English with greater frequency.

However, when one considers feedback from the professors involved in EMI, it is clear that some complications arise; interviews with them indicate that they do not feel competent enough to teach in English. Professors report having to rely heavily on PowerPoint presentations and previously prepared notes when delivering lessons. The authentic communication that is supposed to be the hallmark of EMI is practically absent, as the professors have trouble using English to give examples and detailed explanations to illustrate key concepts. They also seek to limit classroom interaction with and between students, in an effort to avoid embarrassment in the case that they do not understand what a student says.

These findings are similar to those from a case study by Hu and Lei (2014) in a Chinese university. Even if professors were enthusiastic about EMI as a way to facilitate English learning, most participants in the study described their English proficiency as low at the outset. As in the previous

case, professors reported relying heavily on notes and PowerPoint presentations, and even codeswitching to Chinese to explain the more complex concepts. Again, no instance of authentic communication in English was observed.

The lecturers' language difficulties did not appear to go unnoticed, as in both of the above cases students reported having to put significant effort into understanding the content of the courses. Although such findings may be due to the students' low level of comprehension, they also indicate a need for professors to be more flexible in their language use, in order to be able to explain concepts to students with different proficiency levels.

While language difficulties seem less extreme in EMI studies related to the European context, several points emerge that are worth addressing for the purposes of this study. In Northern Europe, in countries such as Denmark, Sweden and the Netherlands, EMI has been widespread in higher education for quite some time (cf. IIE 2013, 7); once again, this phenomenon has not occurred without posing some challenges.

Indeed, the use of a foreign language at university level was the source of a large-scale and heated debate in Denmark, a country often recognized for its high English proficiency also outside the academic environment (cf. Duncan 2014). In their study, Jensen and Thøgersen (2011) used a questionnaire to understand lecturers' attitudes towards EMI at the University of Copenhagen. While reactions to EMI varied, with some of these lecturers believing EMI threatened the future of the Danish language, most lecturers reported more pedagogical concerns; they felt that when a non-native English speaker was teaching in English to non-native English speaker students, the quality of the teaching suffered due to the limited language skills of both parties. The fear was that teachers would not communicate effectively, and that students would not understand minor, though important, details.

Other researchers also used questionnaires and interviews to understand if lecturers felt their English language proficiency had a negative impact on the quality of their teaching. In his work with Swedish professors, Airey (2011) found that they often hesitated to 'go off script' in their lessons, or improvise with anecdotes or pertinent examples. In-depth explanations and details were also avoided, as professors feared that they would not be able to elaborate complex points in a way that students would comprehend. At the end of a questionnaire, Airey asked participants to give advice to new EMI teachers and one of the most common responses was to focus only on major ideas rather than going too deeply into a topic. Although this advice may help lecturers cope with language deficiencies, the implication remains that students will not have access to important course content. In the Netherlands as well, Klaassen and De Graaff (2001) discovered that Dutch lecturers in departments of engineering and technology were also reluctant to improvise explanations and give detailed

examples in EMI contexts, even those with very high levels of English. Again, students quickly picked up on lecturer difficulties, mentioning “the teacher’s lack of linguistic fluency and flexibility and above all [...] pronunciation” (Wilkinson 2013, 18).

One of the common themes in all of these studies seems to be the absence of authentic communication in EMI contexts; even when they claim to have a high level of English proficiency, professors still struggle to explain complex ideas, especially when making examples that would be helpful to illustrate complicated concepts. It is important to take this limitation into consideration in devising strategies to improve the quality of teaching, as well as teacher satisfaction.

## 2.2 Lack of Support in EMI Implementation

In their description of EMI, Ruiz-Garrido and Fortanet-Gómez (2009) present a number of concerns to be addressed that are unrelated to language proficiency. In particular, they refer to the need for all lecturers to understand the basics of language acquisition processes, as well as to have training in intercultural communication. This recommendation, coupled with the information of the aforementioned studies, illustrates the type of comprehensive training and support necessary at least in the early phases of EMI.

To determine what types of certification programs were in place to prepare lecturers to teach in English, O’Dowd (2015) analysed questionnaire responses from seventy universities across Europe. The results of this study are somewhat troubling, as 30% of the participating universities claimed that they did not feel teacher training was an important aspect of EMI implementation. For universities that did provide training, general communication skills were the most common focus of their programs. Other themes appearing with less frequency included lessons on teaching methodology and bilingualism. The study concluded with recommendations for training programs of a much more rigorous nature, to prepare lecturers to effectively teach advanced concepts in a language that is foreign to the students.

Strotmann et al. (2014) reported similar findings with lecturers in Spain; only some had training in academic English and even fewer had any formal training in teaching in English to non-native speakers. In fact, many lecturers reported teaching almost exactly in the same way in both their English courses and the courses conducted in the local language.

Also in Italy, where there has been a rapid increase in courses offered through EMI, Guarda and Helm (2016) found that teachers receive very little didactic assistance when implementing new programs. Their study polled 38 Italian universities, of which 77% reported offering no training

or didactic support to lecturers new to EMI, regardless of their experience or English proficiency.

Hui and Lei (2014) and Byun et al. (2011) presented similar results in the Asian context. In both cases, lecturers supported the push for internationalisation, but claimed that the rapid implementation of EMI did not allow for a proper analysis of available resources and deficiencies in the departments. As a result, they mentioned numerous linguistic and pedagogical concerns while also lamenting the lack of institutional support they had received.

Given the lack of proper EMI training in so many universities, it is not surprising that many professors have struggled in their early years of EMI. Wilkinson (2013) stated that lecturers often describe EMI as negatively affecting the quality of their teaching. For these teachers, EMI became tiresome and time-consuming given the extra preparation required for each lesson. Considering the range of difficulties expressed by academic staff in such a wide variety of contexts, a formal training program appears to be a necessity.

### 2.3 Institutional Response

In response to reported obstacles, many universities have attempted to provide support for their staff in the transition to EMI. For example, in 2001, one study presented a training course organized by the Delft University of Technology, in the Netherlands, to help professors deal with linguistic concerns. Participants would hone their presentation skills in front of their peers, with a particular focus on non-verbal behaviour, organizing lessons and interacting with students (Klaassen & De Graaff 2001, 283). The teacher-training program addressed the following topics (282):

1. Effective lecturing behaviour which suffers from a switch in language
2. Effective lecturing behaviour which addresses the needs of non-native speaking students
3. Awareness of second language (acquisition) difficulties
4. Reflection on beliefs and actual lecturing behaviour
5. Cultural issues if relevant to the first four aspects

This project resembles an English course organised at a Swedish university for new EMI professors. Airey (2011) describes the 12-week language course as having a clearly pedagogical slant. Lecturers were asked to post two video recordings of a lesson on an online platform, one recorded in Swedish, and then the same lesson recorded in English. Participants would receive feedback from their teacher trainer and then comment on each other's videos. In the end, even if participants reported some uncertain-

ties when teaching in English, they claimed to notice very few differences between the English and Swedish versions of their own video recordings.

Guarda and Helm (2016) describe a similar course recently held in a university in Northern Italy; the course was titled *English for Academic Purposes* and was offered during an intensive summer session. The participants were selected after an application process, partly based on their urgency to improve their academic English skills. The principal goal for this course was to understand lecturers' difficulties, with the intention of developing *ad hoc* training programs to address them specifically. This course was also of benefit to participants by encouraging them to share their positive and negative EMI experiences.

Such a setup appears to be sought out and highly valued by new EMI professors; for example, Strotmann et al. (2014) polled Spanish teachers and discovered that many of them asked for a community of EMI practice, requesting an online space to share experiences and teaching materials.

A further example of this kind of project, aiming to improve the language skills of lecturers teaching in English, was organised by the Copenhagen Business School. In 2003, their language centre launched a pilot project to provide "a tool for assessing academic staff with respect to their English language fluency and communication skills" (Kling & Hjulmand 2008, 194). The project was part of the Copenhagen Business School's plan to increase the quality of its courses as, at that time, 42% of their programs were offered exclusively in English. The goal of the project was to help professors from the Business School to reach an overall level of C1 on the CEFR scale (cf. COE 2001). It was also meant to identify both those who needed support, whether linguistic or didactic, and those who could be taken as role models (Kling & Hjulmand 2008, 194). The project proved to be quite effective and was applauded by professors, who felt better equipped to teach through EMI. The limit of this project, however, is that the professors who agreed to be assessed were part of a select group, as many of them had already taught abroad and possessed a high proficiency in English; other members of the teaching staff did not take part in the project (198).

### 3 The Present Study: The Ca' Foscari Department of Management

As the present study involves an Italian university, it is important to understand the Italian context with respect to EMI policies. Helm (s.d.) points out that, although the situation has rapidly evolved in the last five years, Italy is relatively new to EMI compared to other European countries. As the European Union has pushed for greater foreign language proficiency in all member states, Italy has tried to increase the presence of English in high schools through the implementation of CLIL projects. Some Italian regions, such as Lombardy, have been particularly enthusiastic in training teachers in best practices for teaching in English as well as in other foreign languages (cf. Eurydice 2004). However, in many cases, full implementation has been hindered by bureaucratic hurdles and logistical factors. Furthermore, many subject teachers lacked the necessary language proficiency to teach an entire course using English, a problem that was exacerbated by the lack of coordination between subject and language specialists in course development (cf. Leone 2010).

At the university level, apart from some experiences with CLIL (cf. Sisti 2009), Italy still lags behind other European countries in the number of programs offered in English (Costa & Coleman 2012). As is the case with many Italian high schools, research reports a lack of collaboration between subject lecturers and language specialists; institutions do not encourage such collaboration and many subject lecturers do not believe they need it. Other professors, however, are adamantly against teaching in English, feeling that the content would be reduced too much to be of any real benefit to students (Costa & Coleman 2010, 26).

It is in this context that the current study has found fertile ground. The Department of Management at Ca' Foscari University of Venice, Italy, has been offering courses in English for a number of years, like many other Italian business departments (cf. Costa & Coleman 2012, 8). However, now the process of internationalisation has put a stronger pressure on academic and non-academic staff to be able to conduct at least part of their work in English. In June 2015, the vice-director of the Department of Management contacted the Department of Linguistics and Comparative Cultural Studies, to request a language support service for their teaching and administrative staff. As the project evolved over the following weeks, the idea for a help desk service was proposed, which would run from the beginning of November 2015 until the end of May 2016, for 16 hours per week. In a face-to-face format, one English language tutor and one EMI didactics tutor would provide lecturers and members of the staff with support for improving their use of English. The tutors would be available at the department, on certain days and times, and members of the department would be able to book appointments through an online reservation

system. This tutoring service is meant to help lecturers to perform more effectively their teaching and research tasks in English, and to help the administrative staff communicate in English with incoming foreign students and visiting professors.

Additionally, to educate the teaching staff about different issues in EMI, guest speakers are invited once per month to address the following topics: potential issues when teaching in another language, the importance of pronunciation, the role of native or non-native speakers in an international context, and intercultural communication.

To monitor the effectiveness of this project, data has been collected as services are rendered. The aim is to investigate the main problems brought up by lecturers and staff and ultimately be able to meet their needs with tailored solutions to help them cope with the use of English in their academic lives. Therefore, the following research questions were formulated:

- What are the main language needs of the teaching and administrative staff?
- What are the main linguistic and/or methodological difficulties faced by lecturers teaching in English?
- What are the most effective ways to help the teaching and administrative staff to overcome communication problems in English?

To answer these questions, the tutors have kept a diary to record the activities they performed at each appointment. After the first two months, the period between the beginning of November and the end of December 2015, initial data were tabulated and analysed to identify the most common difficulties experienced by the teaching and non-teaching staff. The method used for this study, the collection of data, and a discussion of the initial results will be further explained in the following sections.

## 4 Methodology

The methodology chosen to carry out this study is a mix of qualitative and quantitative methods:

A mixed methods study involves the collection or analysis of both quantitative and qualitative data in a single study with some attempts to integrate the two approaches at one or more stages of the research process. (Dörnyei 2011, 163)

The choice of a mixed method approach was largely inspired by work done through the lens of Grounded Theory. This approach is data-driven, in the sense that it does not use a particular theory to predict a series of results confirming or denying previous studies on the same topic; instead,

it is based on the lack of pre-conceptual knowledge of a topic, to propose a series of theories that emerge from the observation of data. First, it is necessary to find the premises which will lead to the creation of a theory. Next, only as a second step, does one verify if this theory can be inscribed into a wider theoretical system (cf. Glaser & Strauss 2009).

The various advantages of a mixed method approach were also described by Dörnyei (2011, 45-6):

- "Increasing the strengths while eliminating the weaknesses", since mixed method allows to make the most out of the two methods. The qualitative part is the most suitable to understand the context of a study. The quantitative method, instead, gives a more quantifiable and objective point of view which is useful to generalise the result of a study.
- "Multi-level analysis of complex issues" appears as one of the features of mixed method which gives a more complete picture of a phenomenon, thanks to the integration of both numerical and non-numerical data: "words can be used to give meaning to numbers and numbers can be used to add precision to words".
- "Improved validity" of a study can be obtained through the triangulation and convergence of data.
- "Reaching multiple audiences" is particularly important in this kind of study, which is addressed not only to experts in the field of language teaching, but also to stakeholders and a wider audience.

In this project, a qualitative method was used for recording the activities of the language help desk, by giving a detailed account of what was happening in the appointments with lecturers or staff members. Through the descriptions of the activities, it was possible to understand the heterogeneity of the situation at the Department of Management, where users presented various levels of English language proficiency and thus requested different kinds of services, ranging, for example, from the revision of grammar rules to suggestions on class management. Starting from a classification of the various activities, two categories were delineated: one listing the common requests and the other showing the most frequent mistakes which were corrected.

In the following steps of this study, a quantitative methodology will be applied, because data will be collected through a questionnaire handed out to the teaching and administrative staff of the department. The questionnaire will be asking about the usefulness of the language help desk service and the frequency of times in which it was used by each user. In a future

phase of the project, another questionnaire would aim to measure the impact of the service on the participants' self-perception of their language attitudes and abilities, as well as their use of communication strategies in English after using the service.

Furthermore, a questionnaire will be administered to students, who will be asked to give their opinions on the quality of the teaching and the services offered in their degree programs. In this way, it will be possible to triangulate the data and investigate if there are any discrepancies between lecturers and staff self-reported performance and their effects as perceived by students.

The two questionnaires, planned to be administered at different times in the short-term, are:

- The questionnaire to the teaching and administrative staff, which will be delivered before the start of the new academic year in September 2016, to determine whether the help desk service has had a positive impact as regards its usefulness in answering to the academic staff's needs.
- The questionnaire regarding students' experiences in EMI should be administered before the beginning of the fall 2016 semester, or one year after the beginning of the service (ideally at the beginning of November 2016), in a period in which there are no lessons or exams. The timing of this questionnaire is indeed crucial, as the hope is that students will be able to comment generally on their experiences rather than being overly influenced by their feelings about a single lecturer or course. By soliciting responses at a time when courses are not in session, the influence of certain memories should be limited.

A detailed planning of the quantitative data collection of this study has been necessary not only to improve the validity of the analysis, but also to provide a more relevant picture of the current situation at the Department of Management, concerning the quality of teaching. As part of the normal academic evaluation system, students are asked to give feedback on their courses, usually before taking the corresponding exam. Once obtained the data from students' feedback of the preceding years, it was observed that students of this department tend to evaluate courses held in Italian with higher scores than courses held in English.<sup>2</sup> Many hypotheses could be considered to justify these evaluations, and one of the future purposes of this study is to analyse them carefully.

<sup>2</sup> Data were provided by the Evaluation Office of Ca' Foscari University of Venice under privacy conditions.

## 5 Data collection

As described above, data collection was carried out during the activities of the help desk service, in which the teaching and administrative staff of the Department of Management could take an appointment to meet a tutor face-to-face. In the first part of the project, tutors had their office hours for 14 hours a week over a period of two months, between the 1st November and the 23rd December 2015, with the following timetables:

Table 1. Scheme of the help desk office hours

Day	Time	No. of hours a day	No. of weeks	Total hours of service	Total hours of tutoring
Monday	9:30 am – 12:30 pm	3	8	24	10
Tuesday	9:30 am – 1:30 pm	4	7	28	14
Wednesday	2:30 pm – 6:30 pm	4	8	32	13
Friday	9:30 am – 12:30 pm	3	7	21	2

The scheme also reports the number of hours in which tutors were available, and the number of hours in which the service was actually used. The striking difference in the amount of hours between the last two columns on the right of the scheme is due to several factors:

1. The tutors could not be present during week 1 and weeks 5-6 because of other work or personal engagements, therefore the availability of face-to-face service was interrupted, although it was still provided online.
2. Some hours dedicated to translation of documents for the department are not quantified in the table because they were not classified as direct tutoring, even though the translation of documents, for distribution to foreign students and to members of the department, constituted a significant part of the work carried out by the tutors.
3. Other hours, dedicated to online support and to the creation of materials or proofreading of articles, were not included either, as they were not performed on site.

However, since some days and times of the above timetable proved to be unsuitable given the time constraints of some lecturers, the timetable was changed in the second part of the project, which started on the 11th January and ran until the 31st May 2016.

During the initial two months of the project, eight people were making use of the help desk service for tutoring; six of them were part of the teaching staff, and two were part of the administrative staff. Table 2 shows some general data about the participants, whose identities remain anonymous, conforming to ethical norms. In the table, TS and AS refer to Teaching Staff

and Administrative Staff, respectively. The number associated with each user code is simply based on the order in which the user's reservation for the tutoring service was received.

Table 2. General data on the help desk users

User's code	Gender	Age (estimated)	No. of appointments	No. of tutoring hours
TS_001	Female	41-50	5	6
TS_002	Male	51-60	5	5
AS_003	Female	31-40	3	3
TS_004	Female	51-60	3	3.5
TS_005	Male	51-60	11	14.5
TS_006	Female	31-40	4	4
AS_007	Female	61-70	1	1
TS_008	Male	31-40	2	2

In this table, as in the previous one, the hours taken into account are only those in which the tutoring service was performed at the help desk. Thus, Table 2 does not include the hours used for translation services requested by other members of the administrative staff.

Five out of eight participants are female subjects, estimated to be between the ages of 31 and 70, while the three male subjects are estimated to be between the ages of 31 and 60.

An appointment at the help desk would usually last an hour, but in some cases, the user booked one hour and a half, or two hours; this explains why the number of appointments and the number of tutoring hours do not match. Further comments on the kind of participants who used the service, their level of English and their requests will be discussed below.

## 6 Discussion of Findings

From the initial data collected during the language help desk activities, the first element that was observed in the diary entries is the presence of various and heterogeneous language levels. Some of the participants possessed little to no knowledge of English, while others possessed a fair level of competence, corresponding to the B2+ or C1 of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (COE 2001).

Another evident pattern is the diversity of the participants' language needs, which vary depending on their language levels, academic background and role:

- Some of the participants who already possessed a good or high level of English asked for help rehearsing the lessons they would eventu-

ally teach through English. Some of their main goals were improving their pronunciation, and increasing the level of interaction in their classes conducted in the foreign language.

- Participants with lower language proficiency often wanted to prepare materials for their future courses to be held in English, so they sought to improve their writing, listening and speaking skills, to feel more confident in front of their students or with other foreign colleagues.
- Some participants did not teach their subject in English, either because their topic dealt with local and national issues (e.g. Italian law studies) or because they preferred to keep on teaching their discipline in Italian. In these cases, they often sought to hone their general language skills for those occasions in which they have to meet foreign guest speakers, when they go abroad as visiting professors, or present and chair in English at international conferences. To meet these needs, the tutors provided informal language lessons, offering participants grammar and vocabulary exercises, as well as expressions to be used while chairing events.
- Conversation was a common request among the participants at all levels of competence, with many of them citing the difficulty of interacting and presenting in English. The fact that one of the tutors is a native speaker of American English also seemed to be appreciated by participants, as many mentioned having trouble understanding native speakers, and could therefore get used to a native speaker's accent.
- To the most basic English users, only some grammar rules and the basics of English pronunciation were introduced, along with strategies for autonomous practice.

To meet the different language needs of the participants, the activities carried out at the help desk were manifold:

- proofreading of slides and articles
- rehearsing of lessons
- tips on academic writing
- correction of pronunciation and prosody
- pronunciation rules
- vocabulary corrections and suggestions

The tutors kept track of the number of times each activity was requested, and they used this information to create specifically tailored materials to help participants overcome their linguistic hurdles and become more proficient, independent users of English. All of these resources were gathered in an online repository that the participants can access at any time. Even after the conclusion of the help desk service, the materials will still be accessible to help lecturers prepare future courses.

Another aspect that rapidly became the focus of many conversations

with lecturers during the help desk appointments has been their interest in alternative teaching techniques when using English in their lessons. It was originally assumed that they would not respond well to such a pedagogical aspect, as most of them have been teaching for many years and already feel confident in their teaching strategies. However, since the beginning of the project, the tutors' suggestions for using different and more interactive techniques in class have often been welcomed with a certain curiosity and sometimes enthusiasm. 'Providing tips on teaching techniques' was ultimately added to the list of activities given above.

## 7 Conclusions

Even though the results described in this study are still at an early stage, the project at the Department of Management has clearly proven itself an asset, as some professors recommended it to other colleagues, and it was reconfirmed also for the next academic year, in 2016-17. As explained above, the value of the help desk services largely derives from the English language assistance it provides. Lecturers specifically looked for it to develop their oral skills and improve their pronunciation; even when they were not preparing a specific course, they went to the help desk to talk generally about their fields of study, or to increase their language fluency for presentations in more formal contexts. They explicitly asked to be corrected on grammar and pronunciation, to sound more competent in front of their students. Probably with the same purpose, the proofreading of didactic materials, such as exams and PowerPoint presentations, was another commonly requested activity. The need for linguistic assistance is in line with Pulcini and Campagna's findings (2015) that language proficiency is one of the main hurdles to EMI implementation in Italy. As in their study, also the participants from Ca' Foscari University are aware of their linguistic deficiencies and have actively tried to compensate for them through practice and guided support.

The interest in the help desk service is not surprising given the results of the various studies of the Asian context referenced in the literature review, in which professors were frequently upset with university administration for not providing support in the transition to EMI (Byun et al. 2011; Hui & Lei 2014). Since the help desk in the present study represents such an important support, it makes sense that reactions from lecturers have been generally positive.

Still, the relatively small number of lecturers using the service requires some explanation. All professors were informed via email of the help desk's existence before its implementation, as well as several times during the semester. It is indeed possible that the fixed hours of the tutoring service were not conducive to the lecturers' schedules, given their various

teaching, research, and institutional obligations. Friday in particular was frequently cited as an inconvenient day, despite the fact that the schedule was approved by the department.

Another possible explanation for low participation may relate to the fact that many professors were not teaching in English every semester. As such, they may have felt that they had nothing to discuss during help desk hours, preferring to wait until their need for English assistance became more urgent.

The needs of the teaching staff expressed in the tutoring sessions thus far were in line with past research (Byun et al. 2011; Hui & Lei 2014; Airey, 2011). In the studies related to China and South Korea, teachers cited major communicative problems, related to limited English skills. Airey's study of Sweden (2011) presented smaller linguistic problems, such as lecturers not being able to improvise examples and joke with the students. Given that, the participants in this study included professors at all levels of language proficiency, it is perhaps normal that most of the activities have focused on language development and correction.

Regarding the pedagogical support, the tutors initially thought it was better to wait until they were asked for assistance with teaching strategies, to avoid the kind of tensions discussed by Guarda and Helm (2016), which arose in the early part of their course when some participants took personal offense to lessons on didactics. A possible explanation for this may be connected to Jensen and Thøgersen's findings (2011), showing that young professors were generally more willing to teach in English than their more experienced peers. If Guarda and Helm (2016) were working with experienced lecturers, these participants may have felt that their long-standing teaching strategies were being criticized. Newer university members, however, may be more open to learning to teach in English because they are still learning how to teach in general. While keeping these points in mind, the interactions with professors so far indicate at least some initial interest in EMI teaching strategies that will hopefully develop as the project continues.

Lastly, some other uses for the help desk service do not have a basis in the existing literature but still constitute an important part of its activities. One such example is the proofreading of academic articles before publication. As the Department of Management is trying to improve its position in international rankings, publishing quality articles in English is essential; such a finding indicates another considerable aspect of professors working in English, despite not having a direct connection with pedagogy.

Another important activity has been the translation of department communications and announcements, including calls for applications, descriptions of research projects, and applications for accreditation. The translation requests have largely come from the administrative staff and were frequently for documents aimed at increasing foreign student population.

As these two activities do not relate to the quality of teaching in the department, future research may seek to analyse the various linguistic challenges that come with internationalisation and are experienced outside of the classroom.

As mentioned, moving forward, this project will expand its data collection through the use of questionnaires to both lecturers and students in order to identify more clearly lecturers' language and didactic issues, and ultimately to offer suitable solutions and strategies to overcome them.

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