

## La didattica delle lingue nel nuovo millennio

Le sfide dell'internazionalizzazione

a cura di Carmel Mary Coonan, Ada Bier ed Elena Ballarin

# Supporting the Switch to Teaching International Classes in Tertiary Education

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**Abstract** The internationalisation process in European universities has increased since the Bologna declaration was signed in 1999, with many universities adopting English-Medium Instruction as a top-down strategy to improve the international profile of the institution. Against this background, a research and training centre in a university in the North of Italy has responded to requests from some academic staff for the enhancement of their preparation for teaching in English. The centre offers training modules on EMI teaching to international classes. Drawing on the data collected during the modules, and based on a questionnaire sent to 150 lecturers engaged in EMI in a variety of disciplines within the university, this paper reports on the attitudes of lecturers to teaching their subject in English and on adapting contents and teaching methods to international classes. The results reveal a variety of attitudes among lecturers and point to a need to change some teaching practices in relation to the syllabus as well as the type of assessment adopted. Moreover, there is a need to strike a balance between respecting cultural differences in international classes and connecting international students with the local culture.

**Summary** 1 Internationalisation in Higher Education. – 2 Recommendations in the Literature. – 3 Methodology. – 3.1 Tool. – 3.2 Population. – 4 Results. – 4.1 Closed-ended Questions. – 4.2 Open Questions. – 5 Discussion and Conclusions.

**Keywords** Internationalisation. International classes. Lecturing styles. English-medium instruction.

## 1 Internationalisation in Higher Education

In our globalising world, higher education institutions are universally showing a tendency to internationalise. Although nations and regions demonstrate differing priorities, common goals have been identified, such as reputation, visibility and competitiveness, short or long-term economic



This paper developed out of common work and discussion. Specifically, Francesca Costa is responsible for Sections 2, 3, and 4 and Amanda Murphy for 1 and 5.

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gain, and an attention to employability skills (De Wit et al. 2015). Clearly, there is an increase in the importance of internationalisation at all levels of universities, as reported by the IAU Global Survey (Egron-Polak, Hudson 2014) and the latest Eurobarometer (2014).<sup>1</sup> European universities, initially through the Erasmus programmes and subsequently through the Bologna Process and the development of the European Higher Education area, are constantly engaged in developing their degree of internationalisation.

Understandably, internationalisation in higher education in Italy is also undergoing change. Student mobility has been the most obvious internationalisation strategy adopted, and indeed in 2013-14 Italy was ranked as the fifth most popular Erasmus destination, with over 20,000 incoming students (OECD 2014). While the population of international students is generally on the rise (Doiz, Lasagabaster, Sierra 2011; IIE 2013; OECD 2014), Italy's international students enrolled in full-time tertiary education remain a small overall 1%. These students are linked to migration flows, and come mostly from Albania (15.73%), China (10.21%) and Romania (9.72%).

Other strategies, including cross-border education (Knight 2008), are adopted by some foreign universities, such as the American University in Rome. A few Italian universities are venturing outside Italy, examples being the universities of Bologna, Bari and the Bocconi Business School in Milan, which have set up campuses in Argentina and Mumbai, India, respectively (De Wit et al. 2015, 126).

An increasingly popular strategy is offering English-taught programmes or whole degree courses in English. While enabling international students to enrol, this new context should entail an internationalisation of the curriculum (IoC), intended as: "the incorporation of an international and intercultural dimension into the content of the curriculum as well as the teaching and learning arrangements and support services of a programme of study" (Leask 2009, 209), along with a move to make IoC globally relevant in design and delivery (Killick 2015; Murphy, Costa forthcoming). Inevitably, the international classroom also requires a change in teaching strategies by Italian lecturers.

This paper concentrates precisely on the issue of delivery in the context of an Italian university offering English-taught programmes where no studies have yet been carried out and on how lecturers should deal with international classes or adapt their teaching strategies. Concentration on the delivery of courses to international classes arose from observations by lecturers attending an EMI training course in the university, during which one of their biggest concerns was how to teach international classes. This led to a questionnaire administered to 150 lecturers, via the software Qualtrics. The two main issues addressed were:

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1 <http://ec.europa.eu/COMMFrontOffice/publicopinion/index.cfm> (2018-03-29).

- RQ 1: What adaptations do lecturers need to make when dealing with international classes?
- RQ 2 Compared to other countries' guidelines on teaching international classes, how do Italian lecturers behave?

## 2 Recommendations in the Literature

Some countries have a longer history with international students than Italy and various bodies have drawn up guidelines for teaching international students. A summary of recommendations in the main documents is provided here.

In Europe, Denmark is fully engaged in this area (Lauridsen, Lillemose 2015) along with the University of Bedfordshire in the UK (Centre for Learning Excellence 2015). Outside Europe, Oceania is worthy of mention, in particular the University of Waikato in New Zealand and the University of Melbourne in Australia (Arkoudis 2015), both of which have published guidelines online.

The *IntlUni Project* (Lauridsen, Lillemose 2015) provides recommendations for managing international students and for dealing with the cultural differences students may encounter in the academic setting. In this regard, the Project advises lecturers to:

Integrate home and international students, that is, all students in their social and cultural structures by providing an inclusive culture for all;

Develop measures to manage and leverage diversity in order to help all actors increase their awareness of the effects of cultural diversity in the multilingual and multicultural learning space and move towards intercultural learning outcomes;

Develop internationalized curricula, where appropriate, including internationalized learning outcomes which are aligned with adequate assessment pedagogies, to enhance the graduate profiles of students and the employability of graduates. (Lauridsen, Lillemose 2015, 12)

The Centre for Learning Excellence at the University of Bedfordshire (UK) provides guidelines based primarily on the cultural aspects of dealing with international students. These include rather copious and precise theoretical references on power distance and individualistic and collectivistic societies, drawing on the works of Hofstede (1997).

The Teaching Development Unit of the University of Waikato in New

Zealand published<sup>2</sup> a document entitled *Teaching International Students* stating that:

Underpinning many of the suggested teaching strategies is the view that new and not so new international students require additional patience and coaching from teachers to help them adjust to the different culture of university study in New Zealand. (p. 3)

The document goes on to state that:

Working with international students can provide opportunities for wonderfully enriching teaching experiences. We hope this resource will help you make the most of these opportunities. (p. 4)

The document addresses a number of issues, such as building relationships in the classroom, course design, being in large classes, carrying out group work, and each is considered first from the international student's point of view, and subsequently from the teacher's. Strategies to overcome the challenges are suggested for each topic. The guidelines are thorough, and include points of common sense, such as being friendly and approachable after the lesson, and being careful with the use of humour, as well as more technical recommendations such as avoiding writing in capitals, since some students may not be used to mixed case writing and find them hard to read.

On the other hand, the document produced by the University of Melbourne highlights the importance of not harbouring prejudices towards international students:

Much of the discussion of international students has focused on stereotypes: a presumed reluctance to talk in class, a preference for rote learning and an apparent lack of critical thinking skills. Implied within this stereotyping is an 'us' and 'them' approach to students and a deficit view of this group of learners, as people who perhaps 'lack' the desirable qualities in higher education as we understand it. (Arkoudis 2015, 5)

This document provides topics for reflection for both students and teachers, including a section on plagiarism, which explains that some cultures advocate repeating collective wisdom, without requiring the acknowledgment of sources. It also warns that plagiarism may be linked to poor Eng-

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<sup>2</sup> At the time of writing, the document was available online. The University has since removed the document since it is developing new guidelines based on research, due to be published mid-2018. The other materials produced by the Teaching Unit are available at <https://www.waikato.ac.nz/teaching-and-learning/teaching-development/teaching-resources/internationalisation> (2017-01-16).

lish language skills. Another important topic is the need to be explicit, particularly as regards assessment expectations.

The most comprehensive recommendations for teaching international classes are found in Ryan (2005). Apart from linguistic tips, she concentrates on lecturing styles (2005, 97), recommending the presentation of the objectives of the lecture, summarising the main points, signposting important moments through linguistic emphasis, rephrasing, speaking clearly, clarifying unfamiliar words and spelling them, providing lecture notes in advance, and providing a box for questions. Another problematic area touched on is assessment, a delicate topic which may vary considerably from culture to culture.

### **3 Methodology**

The study combines quantitative and qualitative methodology to analyse the questionnaires sent out to participants. The close-ended questions were analysed from a quantitative perspective and the open-ended questions from a qualitative one. The Methodology section is divided into two parts: the first describes the instruments used for the analysis and the second concentrates on the sample population.

#### **3.1 Tool**

The tool used for the investigation was an online questionnaire delivered through the software Qualtrics. The questionnaire contained 25 questions, of which 22 were close-ended and 3 open-ended.

The questionnaire was divided into four sections:

1. General information;
2. Managing international classes (lecturing styles, cultural differences, adaptation of content, epistemological issues, time and preparation devoted to lecture);
3. Dealing with the English language (where levels of anxiety were probed);
4. Assessment (adaptation of assessment).

#### **3.2 Population**

The link to the questionnaire was sent to a population of 150 randomly chosen EMI lecturers teaching in various faculties and departments in an Italian university in the north of Italy. The link was sent with a cover email letter clearly stating the purpose of the study and offering guarantees of anonymity and confidentiality. The questionnaire remained open from mid-

December to the 31st of December. Ninety of the 150 lecturers responded to the questionnaire. The data analysis was provided directly by Qualtrics, which provided elements for commenting on the descriptive statistics.

## 4 Results

In this section we discuss the findings from both the quantitative and the qualitative analyses.

### 4.1 Closed-Ended Questions

The subjects taught by the respondents are mainly in the fields of Economics (39%) and Science (42%), which is in line with previous studies on the typical type of EMI courses in Italy (e.g. Broggin, Costa 2017). The Humanities are nonetheless present for 14% of the lecturers who answered the questionnaire, thus showing that EMI is present even within this subject area.

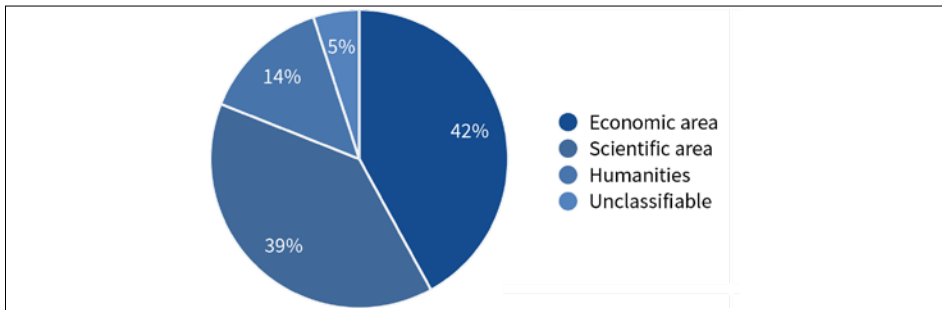


Figure 1. Respondents' subject areas

Regarding the level of teaching, most of the respondents teach at the Masters level (55%), 35% at the Bachelor level and 10% at a generic postgraduate level (including executive or professional Master diplomas). This confirms trends reported in previous studies, which found that most courses for international classes are at the Master's level.

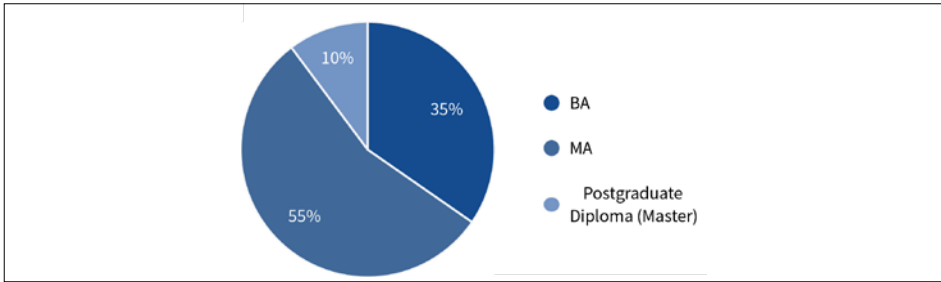


Figure 2. Respondents' level of courses

64% of the respondents stated that they teach the same discipline in English and in Italian, confirming the fact that visiting professors are not yet widely employed as a resource to teach international classes and that universities tend to use pre-existing internal resources. 36% teach the course only in English.

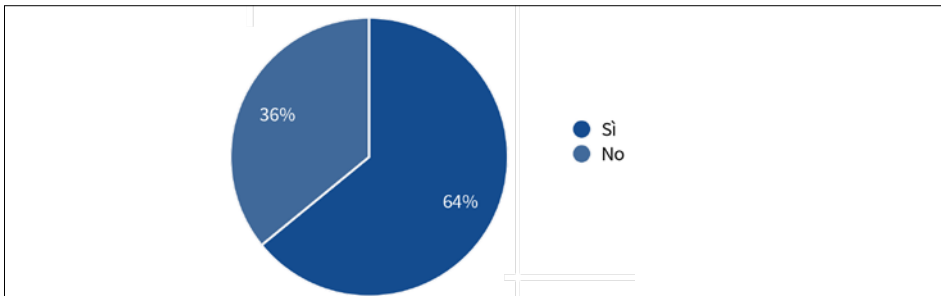


Figure 3. Respondents' language of teaching

There is a fairly even distribution regarding the number of years of teaching experience regarding international classes, ranging from 0 to 20 years.

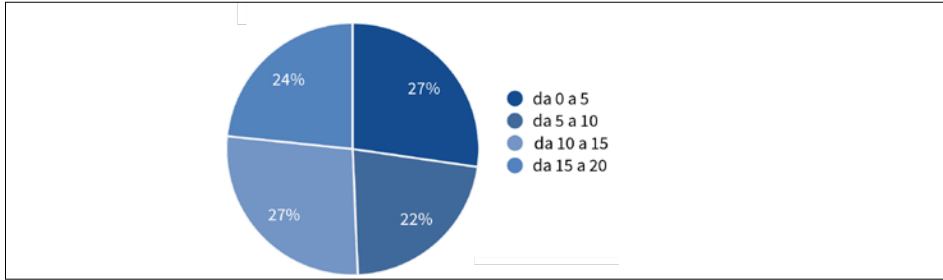


Figure 4. Respondents' teaching experience

Surprisingly, when lecturers were asked if their university had a clear internationalisation strategy, 54% said Yes, with the other responses quite scattered and showing a high degree of uncertainty (25% Partially - yes; 8% I don't know).

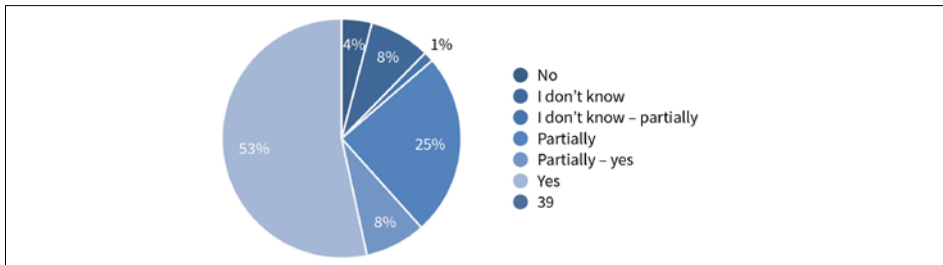


Figure 5. International strategy of the university

When asked if their subjects were suitable to an international audience, the vast majority (69% + 21%) thought that their discipline was suitable. Only a very small percentage (3%) answered No or Perhaps, with 4% Not sure.



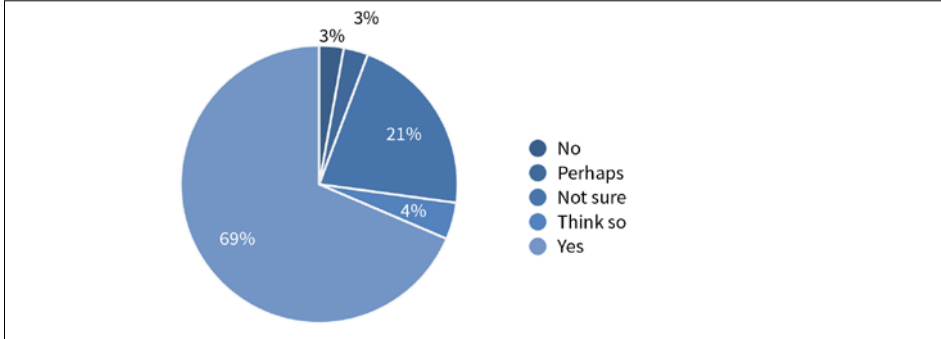


Figure 6. Internationality of subjects

As regards preferred teaching style, the respondents' type of teaching is still dominated by the lecture (49% taught lectures and 34% more lectures than seminars), confirming that lectures are still commonly used even though they might not be the best type of teaching for international students. Only 16% stated they chose to conduct more seminars than lectures.

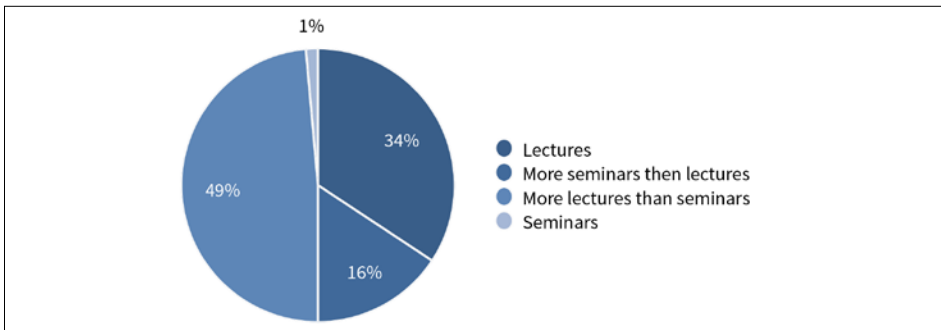


Figure 7. Teaching styles

After being asked if they thought their discipline was suitable for international students, they were asked if they found moments when they had to explain cultural issues; 56% said No and 44% Yes, testifying to the fact that, although they thought their discipline was suitable, they still had to explain cultural issues throughout the course.

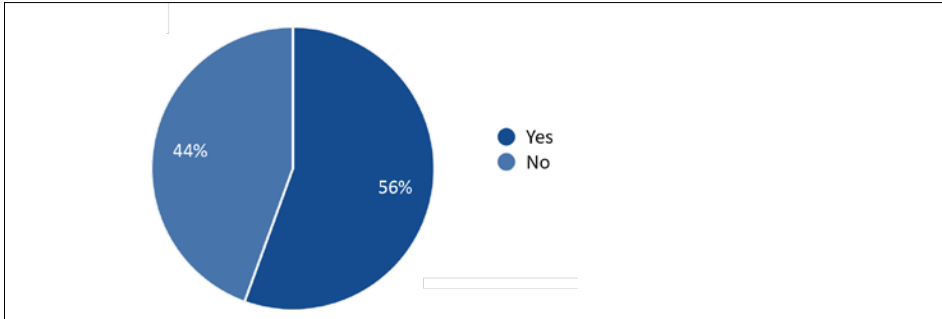


Figure 8. Presence of culturally-related problems

When asked about the preparation time of lectures, 38% of the respondents said it took “the same time” no matter the language of instruction, 36% “more time for Italian”, and 20% “much more time for Italian”. Only 6% said it took “less time” than in Italian, thus demonstrating that this type of teaching can be very demanding for lecturers.

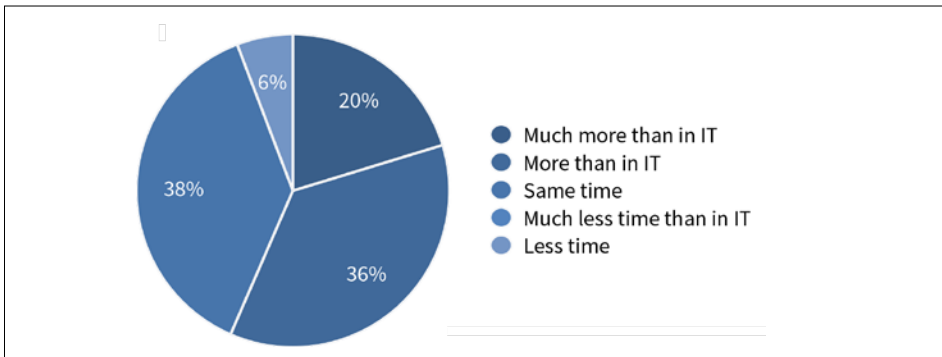


Figure 9. Time devoted to preparation of lectures

When asked if they had to adapt their assessment practice to international classes, they were equally divided between Yes and No.

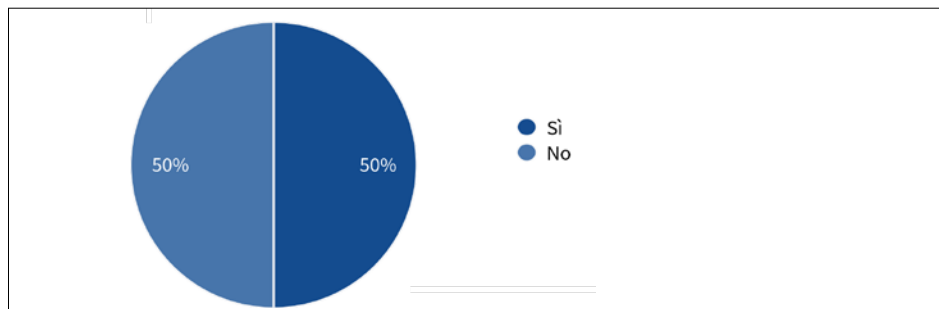


Figure 10. Respondents' change in assessment

Those who responded Yes said that, surprisingly, they had to change from written to oral (33%) and had to do more project work (18%) and more continuative assessment (18%).

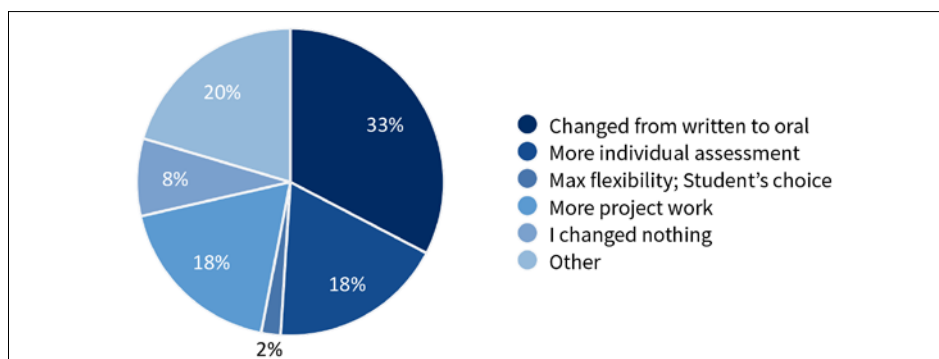


Figure 11. Type of change in assessment

The final question asked whether the language was evaluated separately from the content. The majority said No, which means they considered the two aspects as strictly linked.

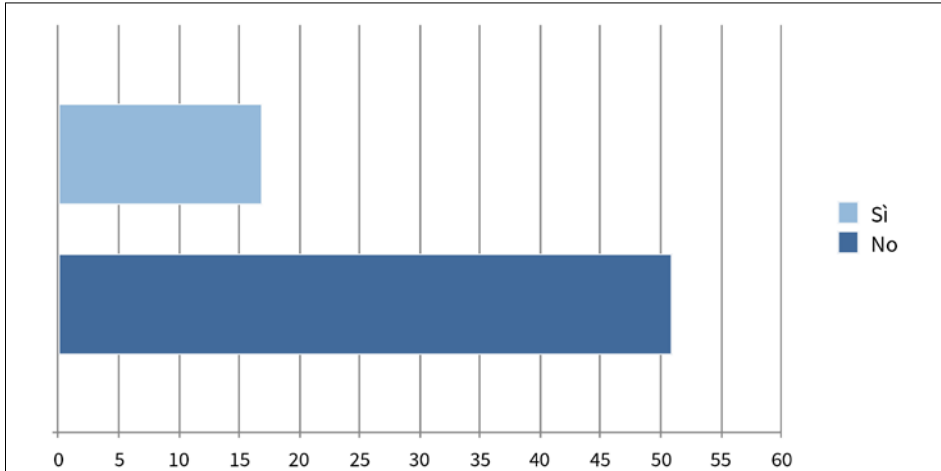


Figure 12. Separation of content and language in assessment

#### 4.2 Open Questions

One of the open-ended questions asked teachers whether or not there were embarrassing moments when teaching international classes. Very few teachers responded to this question, and those that did mainly commented on the students' level of English:

1. Request for clarification regarding the use of unknown expressions or ones which were not used in their country;
2. Little understanding of technical medical definitions using technical medical jargon;
3. Need to repeat several concepts in Italian to Italian students;
4. I notice that the class members (students from many different countries) have very uneven levels of knowledge about historical events, basic economic structures, countries/regions that are not their own, and so on. This objective situation can become an opportunity whenever adequate peer-to-peer communication is encouraged (especially in group work). In all cases, recognizing one's own ignorance and limitations can be very healthy;
5. Many Italian students had a very low level of English and often tried to interact in Italian;
6. Problems understanding my discourse.

One teacher indicated that the use of humour can be problematic:

7. More than one problem with jokes (they are usually unintentional, so they are funny in a very immediately perceivable way).

The second open-ended question asked how the teachers adapted their teaching for international students. The comments below are methodological, linguistic and cultural.

Methodological:

1. Adapting the way of presenting content to a more varied platform;
2. I emphasized the visual aspect in the PowerPoint presentation, in part to compensate for my lesser capacity in English (as opposed to Italian) to bring out subtleties in my discourse;
3. Enriching my discourse with examples and further developing the content;
4. Increasing the interactive and seminar-like parts of the lesson.

Linguistic:

5. Using more simplified language;
6. Using appropriate and precise language.

Cultural:

7. I modified the bibliography, preferring texts in English;
8. Creating specific pptx files for the course based on Anglo-Saxon sources, which I also used for the course in Italian;
9. I substantially eliminated references to the Italian legal system and shifted to the EU legal system. I also made international comparisons;
10. Less theory, more “clinically-oriented” examples. Examples taken from various international contexts;
11. Basically, the courses I teach to international classes are much shorter than similar courses I teach in Italian, and the backgrounds of students are more differentiated. Hence, the topics I teach are very similar; but the language and the examples must be different.

## 5 Discussion and Conclusions

This study has investigated the point of view of university professors regarding the growing number of international classes. This topic has not been thoroughly dealt with at the European level (Teekens 2001), and not at all in Italy. To carry out the research, an online questionnaire was sent to 150 university teachers, with a good response rate (90 lecturers).

As far as the sample is concerned, most of the professors were from the science and economic fields and were teaching at the Master’s level. This is in line with previous studies on EMI in Italy (Broggini, Costa 2017). Most of the professors teach the same subjects in both Italian and English and feel they devote as much, if not more, time to the latter than to the former.

Generally speaking, the professors had a positive view of the experience, even though they pointed out some problems regarding the students’ level

of English; the close-ended questions indicated they did not see any cultural issues. However, the open-ended answers often indicated problems linked to managing the international classes as a hotchpotch of cultures. Therefore, there appears to be a discrepancy between the open- and close-ended questions.

The professors also indicated a certain level of adaptation, especially regarding their discourse in English, the choice of bibliography (more Anglophone authors), and in the teaching support materials (for example, the use of powerpoint). Additional areas of adaptation were the assessment procedure, which surprisingly shifted from written to oral, and the need for more flexibility, more formative assessment, and more project work. It must be said that all these indications are contained in the guidelines drawn up by the universities cited in the first part of the study, which could be usefully made known to the lecturers, and perhaps localised slightly.

This study has focused only on the professors' point of view. Its limitations are that the sample comes from one Northern Italian university, and that future studies could usefully compare its findings with other universities around Italy, as well as with the students' perception of the same issues. Nevertheless, the findings are encouraging in that EMI is perceived by the lecturers as a positive experience and their strategies are generally in line with those recommended in the literature.

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