

Innovation in course design to teach business discourse: students' feedback and insights¹

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ABSTRACT

EN This paper describes a course in English Language and Linguistics addressed to MA students majoring in English for International Communication at the University of Turin (Italy). The course was especially designed for this degree program and integrated the use of language corpora, principles of multimodality, visual and verbal communication in company websites, as well as the analysis of corporate crises. The study draws on feedback gathered from students through an end-of-course questionnaire during the academic year 2023-24. The findings reveal that students appreciated active participation through a hands-on approach and group work on selected case studies. Their responses indicate an openness to new learning methods, though they remain attached to traditional content-based approaches, particularly in assessment. As established models make students resistant to change, this study demonstrates that educational innovation requires student active involvement and an engaging approach.

Key words: BUSINESS DISCOURSE, ESP TEACHING, MULTIMODALITY, DIGITAL COMMUNICATION, CMC, STUDENTS' FEEDBACK

ES En este artículo se describe un curso de lengua y lingüística inglesas dirigido a estudiantes de máster de la especialidad de Inglés para la Comunicación Internacional de la Universidad de Turín (Italia). El curso se diseñó para esta titulación e integraba el uso de corpus lingüísticos, principios de multimodalidad, comunicación visual y verbal en sitios web de empresas, así como el análisis de crisis empresariales. El estudio se basa en las opiniones recogidas de los estudiantes a través de un cuestionario de final de curso durante el curso académico 2023-24. Los resultados revelan que los estudiantes apreciaron la participación activa a través de un enfoque práctico y el trabajo en grupo sobre casos prácticos seleccionados. Sus respuestas indican una apertura a nuevos métodos de aprendizaje, aunque siguen apegados a los enfoques tradicionales basados en los contenidos, especialmente en la evaluación. Dado que los modelos establecidos hacen que los estudiantes se resistan al cambio, este estudio demuestra que la innovación educativa requiere la participación activa de los estudiantes y un enfoque atractivo.

Palabras clave: DISCURSO EMPRESARIAL, ENSEÑANZA DE INGLÉS CON FINES ESPECÍFICOS, MULTIMODALIDAD, COMUNICACIÓN DIGITAL, COMUNICACIÓN PARA LA GESTIÓN DE CRISIS, COMENTARIOS DE LOS ESTUDIANTES

IT L'articolo descrive un corso di Lingua e Linguistica Inglese rivolto agli studenti della LM in Lingue straniere per la Comunicazione Internazionale dell'Università di Torino (Italia). Il corso è stato progettato per il corso di laurea e ha integrato l'uso di corpora, i principi della multimodalità, la comunicazione visiva e verbale nei siti web aziendali e l'analisi delle crisi aziendali. Lo studio si basa sul feedback degli studenti raccolto tramite un questionario di fine corso. I risultati rivelano l'apprezzamento per la partecipazione attiva attraverso un approccio pratico e il lavoro di gruppo su casi di studio selezionati. Le loro risposte indicano un'apertura verso nuovi metodi di apprendimento, anche se rimangono legati ad approcci tradizionali basati sui contenuti, in particolare nella valutazione. Poiché i modelli consolidati rendono gli studenti resistenti al cambiamento, questo studio mostra che l'innovazione didattica richiede il coinvolgimento attivo degli studenti e un approccio coinvolgente.

Parole chiave: DISCURSO AZIENDALE, INSEGNAMENTO DELL'INGLESE SPECIALISTICO, MULTIMODALITÀ, COMUNICAZIONE DIGITALE, COMUNICAZIONE PER LA GESTIONE DELLE CRISI, FEEDBACK DEGLI STUDENTI

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¹ Even if the paper is the product of continuous collaboration among the authors, Antonella Giacosa is responsible for Sections 2 and 4, Virginia Pulcini is responsible for Sections 1 and 3.

1. Teaching English for occupational and professional purposes in higher education

In the course of the new millennium, both secondary and higher education have been compelled to introduce major changes into their programs and syllabi to meet the many challenges of contemporary society, such as the digital revolution, the internationalization agenda and the demands of a highly diversified labor market (Mautner & Reiner, 2017). In addition, a working knowledge of English has become a prerequisite for most occupational and professional careers all over the world, which has led to an increase in the demand for the study of English as a foreign language (EFL) (Gnutzmann & Intemann, 2008), English-medium instruction (EMI) in higher education (Wilkinson & Gabriëls, 2021; Molino, Dimova & Kling, 2022) and a tremendous boost in teaching and learning English for Specific Purposes (ESP), especially in the area of business communication (Garzone & Giordano, 2020; Sing, 2017).

A notable shift has also occurred within the Italian university context and especially degree courses that traditionally provide tuition in Modern Languages. Up to a few decades ago their syllabi would mainly address the educational needs of prospective language teachers and focus almost exclusively on the study of literature and translation. Nowadays many students choose to major in Modern Languages to find a job in other occupational and professional settings. To meet students' interests and cater for the needs of the current job market, new degree courses specialize in Modern Languages in combination with a growing variety of occupational and professional sectors such as hospitality and tourism management, international communication and cooperation, television, cinema and new media, fashion and design, business and marketing.²

One of the first innovative degree courses, still not mainstream in Italian academia to this day, is the MA program in Foreign Languages for International Communication, which has been offered at the University of Turin since 2004. This program was designed to provide students with advanced, specialized competence in two foreign languages, the ability to communicate effectively in intercultural situations and interdisciplinary knowledge of the historical, social, cultural, and economic aspects of the geographical areas in which the foreign languages are spoken. In addition, the course offers background knowledge of social, economics and legal sciences, as well as advanced competences in digital skills.³

With these objectives in mind, and in line with the expected achievements set by the Dublin descriptors,⁴ the course in English Language and Linguistics was gradually redesigned to meet the learning needs of these students. Experimentation on the present-day syllabus started in A.Y. 2019-20 and continued throughout the following years. The modular structure here described reflects the program implemented in A.Y. 2023-24, which consists of three main topics:

- corpus linguistics (18 hours)
- web communication of multinational companies (18 hours)
- communication and miscommunication in times of crisis (18 hours).

In this paper we will report on this English Language and Linguistics course and on the feedback provided by the students who attended it in A.Y. 2023-2024 in greater detail. The goal is to assess how students were impacted by a syllabus combining linguistic and professional aspects, which is an innovative approach for students majoring in English. The research question leading up to this paper is the following:

RQ: In students' opinion, how did the integration of linguistic and work-related aspects in an MA course in English Language and Linguistics impact their learning experience?

To address this goal, this paper first delves deeper into the pedagogical principles that inspired its design and how the development of general and specialized competence in the use of English and specific topics relevant to ESP were combined (Section 2). Second, it presents and discusses the answers to an end-of-course questionnaire provided by the students who attended the course (Section 3). Finally, it draws data-driven

² universality.it

³ https://www.lingue.unito.it/do/home.pl/View?doc=Lauree_Magistrali/Lingue_straniere_comunicazione_internazionale.html

⁴ For the qualifications that signify the successful completion of the second cycle in higher education (MA level) see: https://ehea.info/media.ehea.info/file/WG_Frameworks_qualification/71/0/050218_QF_EHEA_580710.pdf (accessed October 2024)

pedagogical conclusions that could contribute to the innovation and improvement of ESP courses at the level of higher education (Section 4).

2. A student-centred project-based approach: the case study

The primary learning goal of the students enrolled in the MA course in Foreign languages for International Communication is to strengthen their proficiency, not only in terms of general language skills but also in the area of professional communication, starting from an already advanced level tested through an admission test (C1 level of the Common European Framework for Languages). To develop their language competence, students majoring in English are offered a 50-hour course running through the academic year, which focuses on English for Academic Purposes (EAP), especially reading and writing, and leads to a final summary writing test. In combination with the practical language work, students are offered a 54-hour curricular course in one semester, focussed on content-based academic subjects in the area of English linguistics. The results of the two courses are combined to obtain the necessary credits. The curricular course, which is the object of the present paper, aims to expand students' competencies in English for Special Purposes (ESP) – particularly in Business English (BE) – and help them familiarize with some theoretical models and analytical tools that may allow students to observe and analyze the English language used in professional and digital communication. The following sections highlight the considerations that inspired the syllabus design.

2.1. Syllabus design: inspiring teaching principles and contextual considerations

Several aspects were considered while planning the syllabus for this course. BE is a complex strand of research in the dynamic field of professional communication. It is informed by management and organization studies and impacted by e-technologies, the increasing volume of international trade and global integration (Du-Babcock, 2006). Therefore, the study of BE requires an interdisciplinary approach encompassing language pedagogy – i.e. the communicative uses of the language – as well as the knowledge and the training of skills related to corporate globalization and digital competence. This is in line with the recommendations of previous research on higher education degree programmes for business, which advocates for integrating language teaching practices in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) with the development of soft applied skills regarding business communication and workplace knowledge (Ainsworth, 2012; Sing, 2017). The integration of professional and educational factors has been indicated as a necessary step to bridge the gap between the learning experience offered at the level of higher education and the skills required by the work environment, as highlighted in recent accounts of needs analysis (Lung, 2014; Tardy, 2012).

In today's globalized world, ESP students not only need to acquire language skills but also – and most importantly – comprehension strategies and techniques that go far beyond strictly linguistic competence (Gnutzmann, 2011; Held, McGrew & Goldblatt, 1999). They must be trained to join a professional community and effectively communicate with the public, external stakeholders and within the organization they will be a part of (Gerristen & Nickerson, 2009). Furthermore, they need to be flexibly competent to cope with a complex environment requiring a multifaceted communicative competence encompassing multicultural, specialized language and context-related aspects (Sing, 2017). This complex competence requires understanding as conceived by contemporary learning theories and promoted by the Dublin descriptors for higher education. According to Gardner's Multiple Intelligences theory, we understand an idea when we can apply disciplinary knowledge, skills, methods, and ways of thinking to new situations in which we do not know the 'correct' answer yet (Gardner, 2006). The concept of understanding as the application of knowledge is in line with the educational goals inspiring contemporary university pedagogy. Higher education must help students develop an advanced skill set involving the ability to deeply understand and manage complexity, develop original ideas, apply problem-solving skills, and effectively communicate conclusions to various audiences (Bologna Working Group on Qualifications Frameworks, 2005). This is crucial in every field but especially in foreign languages. Language education, including EFL education, must have a transformative goal, which can only be achieved through cultural reflection and understanding within a critically oriented pedagogy (Weniger & Kiss, 2013). The ultimate goal is to facilitate students' development of Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC), which is the ability to relate to new people from other contexts for which they have not been directly prepared (Abid & Moalla, 2019). The emergence of English as a lingua franca (ELF) in business makes BE classes a fertile environment for teachers to integrate language skills with global cultural awareness and soft skills related to global business communication (Abid, 2021; Ainsworth, 2012). To meet the various needs of contemporary BE students, the syllabus was articulated into three different modules, as described in the following section.

2.2. A task-based approach to a three-module course

A task-based approach was chosen to encourage active student engagement with the course contents. Task-based language teaching (TBLT) is based on communicative language teaching and focuses on using authentic language to complete meaningful tasks in the target language (Harmer, 2008). The teacher acts as a facilitator and chooses relevant tasks while encouraging the students to actively participate and contribute by integrating their personal experiences into their language learning environment (Long, 2015). This enhances the mainstream communicative teaching style for BE, which within the ESP field has traditionally focused on lexical items, grammatical structures and discourse functions, by organizing learning around tasks needed to become part of a professional community (Lambert, 2010). This contextualized teaching method favors active student engagement through hands-on activities that the students carry out under the teacher's supervision individually or in groups by exploring possible applications of knowledge referring to the business world.

Three main areas were chosen to help students gain a comprehensive understanding of the various aspects of business communication. First, to enhance student proficiency in ESP and enable them to familiarize with e-technologies, they were introduced to corpus linguistics (McEnery & Hardie, 2011). As pinpointed in Jaworska (2017), the use of corpora has provided relevant insights into frequent lexico-grammatical and pragmatic aspects of BE. Our students familiarized with the main concepts and the application of this methodology to the study of general and specialized vocabulary. Corpus-informed learning is considered an effective digital learner-centred approach to EFL and ESP, as students can examine language features – such as concordances, collocations and phraseologisms – that are useful to increase their proficiency in general and specialized discourse by means of digital tools. This was tested by integrating a more traditional, content-based form of assessment – a multiple-choice test – with an active exploration of lexical and morpho-syntactic patterns. For the latter, they were asked to draw a lexical profile of a phraseologism or a collocation by working on corpora available on Sketch Engine, a corpus query software (Kilgarriff, Rychly, Smrz & Tugwell, 2004) (see Appendix 1).

Second, students familiarized with the multimodal communication of companies and organizations for the construction of their own identity. After being introduced to the concepts and tools of multimodal analysis (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2001; Machin, 2016), they were tested through a traditional individual content-based quiz and a more creative activity, namely the collaborative analysis of the “About Us” sections of corporate websites (Handler, 2017). This task required them to analyze the multimodal orchestration of company web pages in groups while disentangling the combination of resources for meaning-making in digital texts and online interactions (such as speech, writing, still and moving images, music and sounds, layout etc.) put in place by companies to establish their corporate identity (see Appendix 2). In line with the Common Framework of Reference for Intercultural Digital Literacies (CFRIDiL)⁵, this activity had different goals. While analyzing the use of digital tools and the understanding of their affordances in business communication, they increased their digital fluency,⁶ i.e. the ability to discover, evaluate, and use information and technology effectively and ethically. Given the global reach of the companies analyzed, they increased their intercultural communication skills, namely the ability of making meaning in socio-culturally diverse contexts as well as community-specific practices. In addition to the aforementioned abilities, this activity aimed to help students develop the so-called “Transversal Skills” (i.e. use, management and awareness of “soft” skills, including personal and relational skills such as emotional intelligence, stress management and team building).

Third, the students explored crisis management communication (henceforth CMC), namely the strategic use of words to manage information and meaning during a crisis aiming at restricting reputational damage (Coombs, 2021). This transdisciplinary approach to communication covers a series of subtopics such as crisis management, the ongoing approach to communication, the qualities of the spokesperson, the role of social media in communication strategies, and the spread of misinformation and fake news. First, the students became familiar with the details of a crisis and analytical tools to analyze the crisis as such and how internal – within the company – and external communication – with the public – were managed. After the first

⁵ This framework integrates digital literacies and proficiency in English for international communication and can be used as a guidance and reference in the context of intercultural digital literacies. It draws on the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, Teaching, Assessment (CEFR), which was integrated and expanded to cover digital aspects of communication in the 3-year project EU-MADE4LL, European Multimodal and Digital Education for Language Learning (Sindoni, Adami, Moschini & Karatza, 2019).

⁶ This term refers to the ability to discover, evaluate, and use information and technology effectively and ethically (Law, Woo, de la Torre & Wong, 2018)

introductory lesson on the basic concepts of CMC, they explored the field in groups under the teacher's supervision. They analyzed representative case studies and actively applied analytical tools that helped them reflect on business practices and communication choices. Finally, they were given a list of crises⁷ involving companies and were asked to choose one, analyze it and summarize their findings in a written report.

The various steps of this module rely on case studies, a teaching and learning method borrowed from business studies methodology (Ainsworth, 2012). This is a complex activity for students majoring in foreign languages for various reasons. On the one hand, it presents students with information and terminology that are typical of the business world they are still not familiar with. On the other hand, it requires them to critically analyze different speech acts from multiple sources to identify possibly biased and manipulative communicative strategies for a favourable narration of a crisis. This module encourages students to develop higher-order thinking skills and favours critical thinking (Anderson & Krathwohl, 2001). Despite acknowledging the benefits of this method, research on the use of case studies in BE classes has recommended a gradual introduction in the syllabus (Esteban & Cañado, 2004). In line with these recommendations, students gradually assimilated the terminology and necessary information by analyzing case studies individually and in groups, discussing their findings in class and asking for further clarifications in Q&A sessions. Finally, they were asked to apply their knowledge to understand a complex situation and use the appropriate terminology to describe it.

In addition to encouraging students' active engagement, the tasks in the three modules required students to increase their motivation and enhance their learning. Since they replicate the job of professionals in a real workplace, these tasks qualify as examples of Authentic Assessment (AA), a contextualized approach to teaching and assessing involving higher-order thinking skills (Villarroel, Bloxham, Bruna D., Bruna C., & Herrera-Seda, 2017; Villarroel, Boud, Bloxham, Bruna D. & Bruna C., 2019). This approach to evaluation was deemed an effective way to assess real competences and 21st-century skills, such as critical thinking, which are crucial for new generations of students (Atmojio, 2021; Giacosa, 2023). This approach is deeply rooted in a constructivist conception of knowledge and focuses on curriculum goals, the enhancement of individual competence, and the integration of instruction and assessment (Atmojio, 2021; Tessaro, 2014). The constructivist approach is recommended in language teaching because it is learner-centred and encourages learners to actively participate in their learning process, rather than passively receiving information. Learners are encouraged to experiment with the language, make mistakes, and learn from those mistakes. The following section on the students' feedback will show how this pedagogic proposal impacted their learning.

3. Monitoring students' feedback through end-of-course questionnaires

3.1. Methodology: The questionnaire

To monitor the outcomes of the experimentation, we created an end-of-course questionnaire to collect valid and reliable data on student satisfaction and suggestions for improvement. This is considered an effective tool to collect feedback from students and provide strategic-level information aiming at improving the quality of higher education courses (Watson, 2003; Richardson, 2005).⁸ The end-of-course questionnaire was created with a Google form and sent by email to the 76 students who attended the course in A.Y. 2023-24. We received 53 responses, corresponding to a 70% response rate. The majority of the respondents were females (88.7%) and a minority were males (11.5%), a proportion that generally reflects the composition of the student population enrolled in degree courses in Modern Languages. The questionnaire included 12 questions focused on the students' learning experience that aimed to measure the linguistic, digital and multimodal input students felt to have acquired through hands-on activities and group work on case studies. The answers will be presented below with some meaningful comments provided by the students.

⁷ Examples of articles introducing case studies to be analyzed: <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2023/jun/30/disney-female-employees-wage-disparity-lawsuit>
<https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2023/may/09/italian-oil-firm-eni-lawsuit-alleging-early-knowledge-climate-crisis>
https://www.theguardian.com/media/2023/feb/02/netflix-accidentally-posts-guidelines-for-cracking-down-on-password-sharing?CMP=Share_AndroidApp_Other

⁸ At the University of Turin, all students must fill out an evaluation form (called Edumeter) for all the courses they have attended before enrolling and sitting examinations. This is one of the tools available for monitoring the quality of teaching. By contrast, this end-of-course questionnaire was created for internal purposes only, to collect students' feedback on the specific contents of the English Language and Linguistics course.

3.2. Findings

The initial set of questions (n. 1-2) asked students which modules of the course had helped them the most to improve their English proficiency. The module on corpus linguistics was selected by the largest share of the respondents (47.2%), followed by CMC (37.7%) and multimodality (15%). The respondents considered the module on corpus linguistics a new, interesting way to expand their vocabulary (words, collocations, phraseologisms and morpho-syntactic patterns) through the use of digital tools. What emerged from the comments was that students felt they had acquired autonomy in the analysis of vocabulary and experienced the pleasure of “discovering” lexical patterns, thus empowering their agency as learners. Having access to authentic language was also positively considered because it is an opportunity to understand how language is used by native speakers, which is considered the most desirable model by most Italian EFL learners. Here are some examples of comments reported verbatim:

- 1) Analyzing the corpora, I discovered new terms, new syntactic structures and many idioms.
- 2) It allowed me to understand how words are naturally used by native speakers and with which words they most frequently collocate.
- 3) It provided me with new tools for the investigation of the English language.
- 4) It was interesting analyzing corpora using Sketchengine tool (I've never used it before) this improved also my digital skills learning how to surf through it

Those who selected CMC justified their choice by stating that this module helped them familiarize with the language used in real-life situations and taught them to appropriately communicate in specific professional settings. In other words, students experienced the pragmatic dimension of discourse and developed greater awareness of communication strategies that help speakers respond to a critical situation and repair their own reputation. Another positive aspect of this module in relation to the acquisition of language competence was the assignment of a written paper, which made students focus on their writing skills. Here are some relevant comments:

- 5) The module is more linked to real-life situations.
- 6) CMC helped me understand how to manage a hypothetical company crisis in real life through linguistic features and effective communication strategies.
- 7) While writing the final paper on CMC I learned new vocabulary and useful expressions used in academic language.
- 8) The choice of the multimodality module by a smaller number of students was explained by the useful exposure to new language during classroom interaction and in the reading assignments.
- 9) It was an interesting and interactive way to learn about English
- 10) Strong presence of new terms and expressions.
- 11) Because I have explored this topic with many readings that have allowed me to improve my English proficiency

The following set of questions (n. 3-4) asked students which module of the course had helped them the most in developing useful skills for their future professional life. A large majority of respondents answered these questions by indicating the module on CMC (67.9%), followed by multimodality (22.6%) and corpus linguistics (9.4%). Here the situation is reversed, as corpus linguistics was considered somewhat unrelated to their future job, whereas CMC was seen as closely connected to their specific field of specialization – business communication in international environments – and the world of work. Comments related to this question were particularly elaborate and truly enthusiastic, detailing the many advantages that this module had offered. In particular, students appreciated the interdisciplinary nature of this topic –encompassing communication science, business discourse, sociology and rhetoric – and its relevance to both the world of business and present-day events. Some students pointed out the importance of training future managers to handle complex situations ‘from within’, find solutions and adequate responses to crises arising in different professional settings, cope with stressful situations, and communicate effectively through different media. The wide range of stimulating case studies discussed in class and the one they chose for their final report offered students the opportunity to develop a critical perspective towards real-life events, also considering that facts may now be skewed by the deliberate spread of misinformation, disinformation and fake news.

- 12) With this module I learnt how to handle crisis situations, what kind of approach to take and what language to use. I think this module is perfect for the kind of work we should do once we have finished this university course.
- 13) I would like to work in a company, in the communication area, and this module has taught me how to communicate properly with stakeholders, in particular in times of crisis.
- 14) I was able to understand business mechanisms concerning company communication that I did not know before, in particular about the importance of speed of communication both internally within the company and externally (e.g. on social media or the website) in the event of a company crisis.
- 15) CMC module helped me improve my ability to manage stressful situations, work under pressure and adapt quickly to unpredictable events.

Students who opted for the lessons and activities focused on multimodality gave several reasons: they seemed to enjoy getting to know more about visual communication, company websites of known and new brands and navigating online. Students appreciated the proposed group activities, which stimulated group discussion and decision-making for the presentation of a company’s “About Us” section.

- 16) Considering our nowadays work fields, most of them are based on the use of websites, hence knowing how to develop them in a multimodality sense was useful for me.
- 17) Multimodality module helped me the most to develop useful skills for my future professional life because working in a team I had the chance to learn and improve how to coordinate my work with that of my colleagues and how to manage group projects.

Figure 1 displays the data analyzed so far, showing that the modules on corpus linguistics and CMC were rated higher for the development of English competence and CMC and multimodality emerged as the modules that helped the most to develop professional skills.

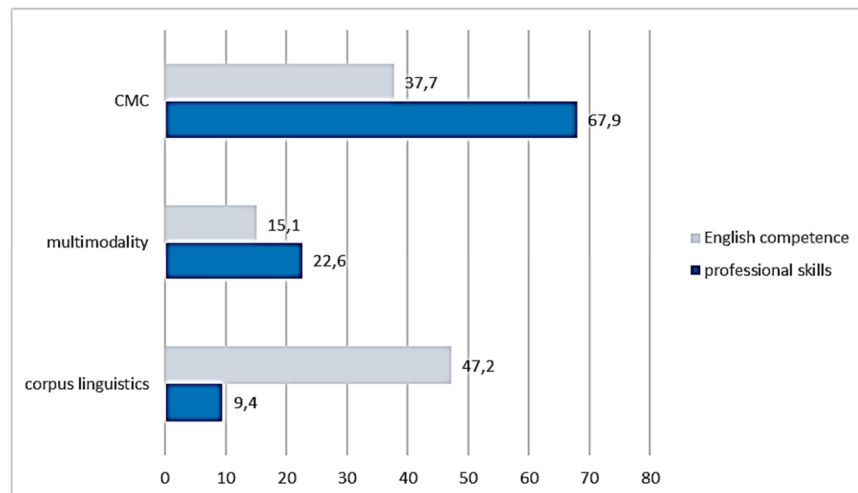


Figure 1. Skills developed in the three modules of the course

Question 5 aimed to find out how familiar students were with multimodality before attending the course. This information can be useful to redress the complexity of the reading material and the classroom activities. In fact, this is what emerged from the students’ feedback. The answers were based on a scale from 1 to 5, ranging from minimum (‘I did not know about it’) to maximum familiarity (‘I was already familiar with this approach’). As shown in Figure 2, 40.4% of respondents selected a mid-range value (3), 23.1% and 5.8% had a high degree of familiarity (4 and 5), and 9.6% and 20.2% opted for a low level of familiarity (1 and 2). Overall, a medium to high level of familiarity emerged from the data (69.3% summing up values 3, 4 and 5). This trend was to be expected, given that many students are familiar with digital technology and capable of navigating digital devices. Moreover, they had also attended a course in visual communication in their first year. This fact suggests that an update of the approach and the materials used in this module is necessary to stimulate students’ interest and motivation.

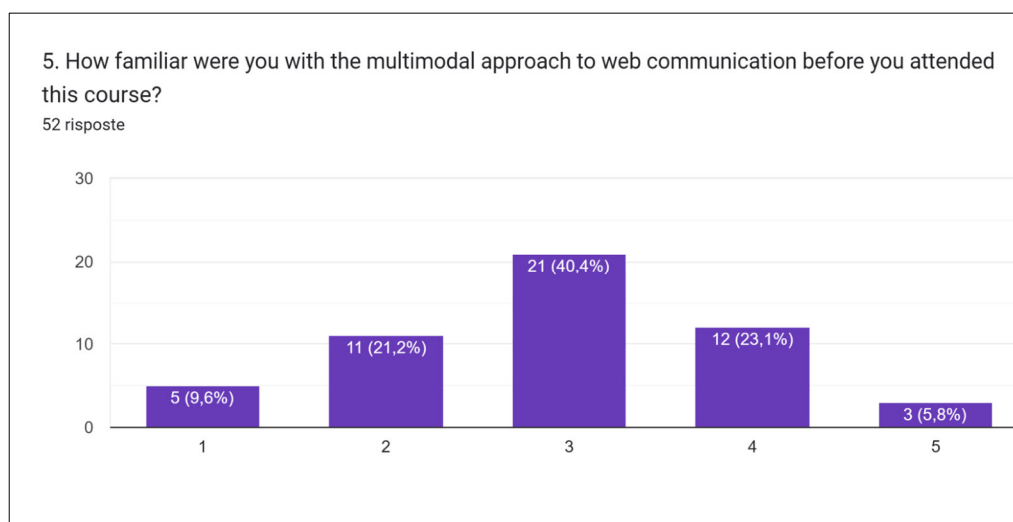


Figure 2. Students' familiarity with multimodality

Question 6 asked what students felt they had learned about multimodality that they did not know before the course. The answers to this question highlighted the fact that the course provided a theoretical framework (the field of semiotics and the notion of 'mode' as a semiotic resource to express meaning) to help them systematize the analysis of websites and made them more aware of the resources and strategies available to web-designers to enhance the efficacy of corporate communication. Here are some comments:

- 18) I didn't know that it was a specific strategy used by companies to convey or focus on specific meanings.
- 19) Before studying this module I never paid enough attention to how a company's website is structured and now I see things differently.

Question 7 focused on the contribution of the English Language and Linguistics course in further developing students' digital skills. In this case, the scale from minimum (only a little= 1) to maximum (very much= 5) weighed more on a positive input for strengthening students' digital skills: in fact 38.5% selected a mid-range score (3), 34.6% a high score (4), and 15.5% the highest (5), against 9.6% (2) and 1.9% (1) that selected lower scores. Overall, the sum of the mid and high scores (88.6%) indicates that the exposure to corpora, websites and materials (including the Moodle platform of the course) contributed to students' familiarity with technology, although it is important to stress that the curricular course was primarily about English language and linguistics.

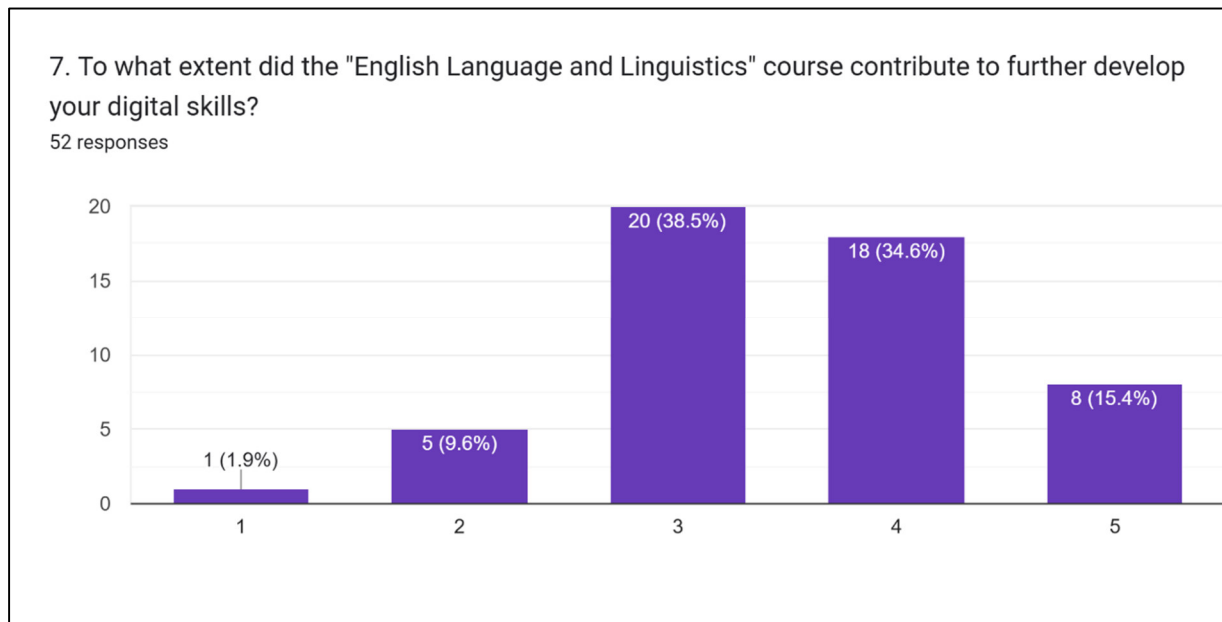


Figure 3. Development of digital skills

Question 8 was about their opinion on the digital component of the English Language and Linguistics course: this confirmed a positive perception about their improvement in digital skills: in fact, 64.2% selected the option 'I learned something new about digital technology' and 34% selected the option 'I learned many new things about digital technology'; only a small fraction (1.8%) opted for the option 'I did not really learn anything about digital technology'. These answers provide an even higher positive perception of the digital component of this course (98% by adding 'I learned something new' and 'I learned many new things').

As previously mentioned in relation to questions 3 and 4, a large majority of course attendees declared their preference for the module on CMC. Question 9 asked them to place the main positive characteristics of this module, offering a choice among 4 options, in order of importance. The positive characteristic that received the highest rating was 'its interdisciplinary nature' (43%), followed by 'its relevance to the world of business' (34%) and 'its connection to present-day events' (34%) and finally 'the importance for the training of future managers' (32%). These results suggest that, in this initial phase of university life, students' opinions are mostly influenced by the academic preferences that led them to choose this degree course, i.e., a variety of different disciplines that are not normally found in degree courses in Modern Languages. The connection to the world of business and present-day events are also considered strong motivating drivers, while they may not see themselves as future managers yet, although more than one third of the respondents recognize this as a positive characteristic of this course.

Questions 10 and 11 were focused on the activities that students considered particularly useful for enriching their academic competence. Again, these activities had to be placed in order of importance. In addition, respondents were asked to provide free comments. Surprisingly, the activities placed in first position by the highest number of students were the online tests. Comments underlined the importance of 'studying notions' and being formally tested. The two tests that students had to take were multiple-choice quizzes based on the reading assignments about corpus-linguistics and multimodality. This preference indicates that Italian students are accustomed to written and oral assessment tests and feel the need to be guided by the tutor.

- 20) Thanks to the intermediate tests, we had the opportunity to gradually study the notions, internalize them and apply them.
- 21) With online tests I have less anxiety, while presentations put more pressure on me

The Q&A activities in class were the next most appreciated tasks carried out during the course. These were guided by various types of prompts such as videos or short articles that students had to work on in groups, followed by peer-to-peer and class discussions.

- 22) Q&A activities in class: encouraged critical thinking and engagement. Asking questions and participating in discussions could have deepened your understanding of the subject.

The next activities that received appreciation from students were the preparation and delivery of two digital presentations supported by slides (see Appendix 1 and 2), which required the additional submission of written scripts. The first presentation consisted in the lexical profile of a phraseologism or collocation; the second was the analysis of the "About Us" webpage of a company. These presentations were delivered in groups either in class or recorded as an mp-4 file and uploaded on the Moodle platform of the course. Scripts were uploaded on the Moodle platform for evaluation. The writing of the scripts was placed in fourth position in terms of usefulness for enriching the students' academic competence.

- 23) I really enjoyed the presentations, I believe it's easier to understand and learn something when put into practice.
- 24) I think the two PowerPoint presentations were really useful for learning to speak in front of an English-speaking audience about a research work that I had done myself
- 25) Also the lessons delivered by the tutor on the theoretical content of the course were appreciated by students, although they rank only in fifth position.
- 26) The tutor's presentation of the theory was very useful to understand something new.
- 27) In my opinion it is essential to have the explanation of theory and new concepts, but to really learn them it is important to have something real to apply it to (ie. the cases).
- 28) The last activity in order of usefulness was corpus-based research on phraseology, for the reasons well described in the following comment.
- 29) Although it was instructive to learn notions about corpora, I put the corpus part at the end because I found it too "static and decontextualized."

Overall, the impression was that some students were not very keen on technology and found it difficult to access and use the corpus-query tools presented in class with sufficient ingenuity and independence.

To conclude, the final question 12 asked students to suggest improvements for the English Language and Linguistics course the following year. The majority (54%) thought that the course was already well-balanced and had no suggestions. About a third (35%) recommended more practical activities to be done in class and 9% would encourage more discussion in class. This partly confirms the positive evaluation given to Q&A activities during classroom time: it seems that students liked working in groups and discussing issues among themselves (they often resorted to Italian, although they were encouraged to speak English during classes), whereas they were more reluctant to speak up and actively participate in open debates.

4. Discussion and conclusion

Recent research has highlighted the need for tertiary education to bridge the gap between the academic syllabi and the work environment to better prepare students for the challenges of an increasingly digital, complex, intercultural and changeable work environment (section 1). This paper has reported on a task-based educational experiment which consisted in three modules helping MA students majoring in English reach various goals (section 2). On the one hand, they were offered the possibility to increase their understanding and proficiency regarding lexical and pragmatic aspects of EAP and ESP. To this end, they were provided with the analytical framework and tools to examine visual and verbal texts belonging to different genres and having different scopes (company web pages, newspaper and magazine articles, press releases, etc.). On the other hand, they were actively engaged in autonomous, hands-on activities related to business communication to sharpen their occupational and digital skills.

While planning the course syllabus, we adopted a student-centred approach to encourage active student engagement and the development of critical-thinking and soft skills in addition to language proficiency. After introducing the guiding principles and outlining the course structure, we presented the student feedback obtained through an online questionnaire. Measuring the teaching efficacy of degree programmes, curricular courses and all types of educational activities at all levels of education has become a very common practice to provide quality assurance and academic recognition of institutions. Our end-of-course questionnaire was designed and implemented for internal purposes only, to collect students' feedback and insights on the choices made as far as contents, skills and assessment were concerned. This feedback allows us to evaluate how the students reacted to an innovative educational approach in higher education courses for English majors that

differed from traditional methods (section 3). In the following sections we will first discuss the findings against the background of our inspiring principles of the course in order to answer our research question: *In students' opinion, how did the integration of linguistic and work-related aspects in an MA course in English Language and Linguistics impact their learning experience?* Then, we will draw the main pedagogical implications while providing suggestions for future research.

4.1. Assessing course quality through students' feedback and insights

To assess the impact of the course on learning, we can analyze our students' perspectives with reference to three areas: language proficiency, work-related skills, and digital competence. Our students' feedback indicates that the three course components have been beneficial (albeit to varying degrees) in improving their linguistic skills. Our students appreciated being confronted with authentic language while working on corpora and real cases of crisis management communication. They increased their knowledge and comprehension of general and specialized vocabulary and became aware of pragmatic and strategic aspects of the language they had never reflected upon. They felt that the linguistic and multimodal analytical tools they used made them more autonomous in actively producing quality written texts where they could apply theoretical principles. Therefore, our task-based approach proved successful in helping students sharpen their reading and writing skills by encouraging them to actively apply the knowledge and approaches – especially corpus linguistics – presented in the course. This aligns with the so-called Dublin descriptors, which recommend teachers to help students apply theoretical knowledge and develop the ability to talk to various audiences. Indeed, in their open comments, students reported that the course increased their ability to achieve a more comprehensive understanding of ESP and more effective competence in producing clearer written and oral texts.

This increased contextual sensibility in the use of English is intertwined with work-related skills, the second area of competencies our course aimed to develop. Similarly, the three components were perceived as useful in helping students prepare for their future careers. Although the students' preferences in this area mainly referred to CMC, the comments show that the other two modules also contributed to developing occupational skills. So, the choice of combining them in one course proves effective as it allows students to acquire various skills they can apply once they enter the job market. The majority of students prefer CMC due to its practical applications in the field of business communication, which is a fascinating and complex area that many of our students are likely to pursue as a career. However, the module on multimodality was also appreciated because it allowed students to work on visual components – a relevant aspect of our contemporary society – in a brand-based context. It was appealing because they had the opportunity to investigate the multimodal semiotic contexts of the companies they deal with in their everyday lives as consumers and might work for in future. Those two components made them feel as if they were gaining an insider's view of their future work field that might help them in their professional life. In this respect, corpus linguistics seemed less effective, as it was chosen by few students. Given the educational value of a corpus-based approach in the literature on business communication teaching, we will try to highlight the benefits of this approach for increasing general and professional language proficiency in our future courses.

This seems relevant also regarding the third area of interest of our paper, namely students' digital skills. As illustrated in section 3, the majority of our students perceived the course as beneficial to increase their digital competence. Despite being familiar with the digital world, they experienced it for the first time from a professional perspective. While using corpus-based tools like Sketch Engine or more familiar resources like videos and software for visual presentations, they experimented with an active and digitally enhanced approach to language learning. In addition to achieving in-depth comprehension of lexical and pragmatic structures, they actively used them while creating oral and written digital presentations. This result is encouraging, as it shows that the course complied with recommendations from various stakeholders at the international level to increase students' digital literacy and fluency. However, also in this third area, the module of CMC gained more appreciation than corpus linguistics or multimodality. This is surprising, as the digital component also plays a relevant role in the other two areas. As highlighted in section 3, this may be explained by the job-oriented approach of MA students, which make them view the topics and activities they consider more connected to their future careers in a better light. In the future academic years, we will continue to implement the digital aspects of the course and help students master corpus-based tools and grasp the variety of their possible applications to language learning and for professional purposes.

4.2. Suggestions for improvement and pedagogical considerations

The findings have shown that students positively evaluated the interdisciplinary approach we adopted in the course. Their answers show that the organization in three different modules proved effective, which confirms the recommendations for the integration of not-strictly linguistic components in courses in business communication that has been suggested in previous studies. Students considered the course well-balanced and appreciated the collaborative activities. They were guided and supported by the teacher and their peers while using different analytical tools that helped them focus on different aspects of the language and increase various skills. This is relevant not only because it appealed to various types of students' intelligences and allowed them to express their different talents and abilities. It contributed to sharpening our students' comprehension of the semiotically complex contemporary world where intercultural, digital and linguistic aspects are intertwined. While pursuing their active approach, the course has provided students with tools they will use in their academic and future careers. When asked for suggestions for improvement, they did not question the type of modules or activities. On the contrary, they appreciated them and grasped the benefits of this well-rounded approach for the development of their language and professional skills. The only suggestion they provided refers to the implementations of class discussions. This confirms that students appreciate an active involvement in the course and the possibility to work in teams. This aligns with the recommendations for a shift in higher education from a lecturer-centred and theoretical approach to a student-centred approach that encourages students to actively engage with the contents and their peers.

However, students' answers show that there is room for improvement. Students' responses show a willingness to adapt, indicating their openness to new learning methods. At the same time, their strong attachment to traditional, content-based approaches – especially in assessments – suggests a reluctance to fully embrace change. On the one hand, we aimed to provide them with a comprehensive approach encompassing traditional content-based testing with tasks that would elicit an active, critical and creative behaviour (e.g. the case study). On the other hand, we found it surprising that some students considered the former as their preferred way of gaining knowledge. Although they were a minority, this shows that they experienced traditional approaches to teaching that favored the concept of effective learning as the acquisition of notions. In other words, this indicates that, at least at the university level, students are still taught traditionally, which makes them consider conventional forms of testing the most effective tool to assess their learning. This suggests that established models continue to play a significant role in the learning experience, making students resistant to change. Therefore, to contribute to innovation in higher education courses, it seems necessary to actively involve students and increase their awareness of the benefits of a more creative, student-centred and engaging approach. In our future courses, it may be useful to discuss learning strategies and goals in order to include students in the process of necessary change of tertiary education. Although this paper investigated a single course, we believe that the insights provided by our students can contribute to the ongoing discussion on ways to make learning at the university level a more updated and relevant experience.

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Appendix 1.

Extracts from students' presentations
(concordance of the idiom 'keep an eye on' and word sketch of the verb 'explore')

POS TAGS AND MEANING

keep an eye on somebody/something
 ★ to take care of somebody/something and make sure that they are not harmed, damaged, etc.

Source: Oxford Learner's Dictionary

Collocations

concrete vs abstract

intensifiers

cognitive activities

modifiers of "explore"	objects of "explore"	subjects of "explore"
systematically ... systematically explored	possibility ... explore the possibility	chapter ... This chapter explores
afield ... to explore further afield	island ... explore the island	tongue ... tongue shyly exploring
thoroughly ... been thoroughly explored	avenue ... explore these avenues	worth ... are numerous cloughs worth exploring in the Dark
extensively ... has been extensively explored by	potential ... to explore the potential	researcher ... researcher explores
fully ... fully explored	theme ... explores the theme	project ... project explores the
briefly ... briefly explored	relationship ... explore the relationships	research ... research explores the
elsewhere ... explored elsewhere in	issue ... explore the issues	finger ... fingers explored

Appendix 2.
Screenshots from students' presentations
(Diesel's About us page; l'Oréal's rhetorical strategies)

“About Us” page

logo and tagline

table of contents

simple visual

IDEAL part: image/identity of the company

- **Corporate** website
- Stakeholders: **customers**, companies, suppliers

RHETORICAL STRATEGIES & TEXTUAL ELEMENTS FUNCTIONS

Beauty is our DNA. From the very first hair dye L'Oréal produced in 1909 to our innovative Beauty Tech products and services today, our company has been a pure player and leader in the beauty sector worldwide for decades.

Using these linguistic items, the company aims at promoting itself as an experienced partner

➡ Trasporent communication

Who We Are

For more than 110 years, we have devoted our energy and our competencies solely to one business: beauty. We have chosen to offer our expertise in the service of women and men worldwide, meeting the infinite diversity of their beauty desires. We are committed to fulfilling this mission ethically and responsibly.

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