

International Journal of Language, Translation and Intercultural Communication

Vol 4, No 1 (2016)

Special Issue: Foreign Language Teaching in Tertiary Education: Economy and Foreign Languages



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doi: [10.12681/ijltic.10351](https://doi.org/10.12681/ijltic.10351)

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To cite this article:

WILLIAMS, C. (2016). Survival strategies for teachers and researchers of ESP in economically challenging times. *International Journal of Language, Translation and Intercultural Communication*, 4(1), 7-15.
<https://doi.org/10.12681/ijltic.10351>

Survival strategies for teachers and researchers of ESP in economically challenging times

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Abstract

I outline some of the challenges for teachers and researchers of ESP in this period of prolonged economic crisis from the perspective of someone who has taught English for law students and political science students for many years, is editor of the journal ESP Across Cultures, and is Head of the Language Centre of Foggia University. I focus on three issues: 1) teaching LSP at university level in a context of contradictory pressures coming from ministerial insistence on internationalization of Italian universities in an increasingly globalized world while drastically reducing funding at all levels; 2) research in ESP, where I outline the vibrancy of ESP studies despite the economic hardships, but I surmise that this is partly the result of a shift towards providing practical language skills for future professionals in line with the marketization of tertiary education; 3) the emerging role of CLIL (Content and Language Integrated Learning), where in Italy it is now law to provide part of secondary school tuition of a non-language subject in a foreign language: I outline the ways in which ESP and CLIL can mutually complement each other. I conclude by arguing that the future looks bright for ESP studies despite the economic crisis.

Keywords: *ESP, economic crisis, teaching, research, CLIL*

1 Introduction

It is a pleasure and an honour to be presenting a paper here in Igoumenitsa at the 4th International Conference on ‘Foreign Language Teaching in Tertiary Education: Economy and Foreign Language’ almost 10 years after my last visit. Over the last decade we have all been profoundly affected by the prolonged economic crisis which continues to weigh down on our daily lives, particularly in the working world. Of the 28 member states of the European Union none has been more severely hit by the crisis than Greece, the country that – paradoxically – gave the world words and concepts such as ‘economy’ and ‘crisis’ in the first place. But also in Italy, just a boatride away from here, the unemployment situation is dramatic, and there seems to be no light at the end of the tunnel. Academia worldwide has been forced into making some painful decisions, which generally means implementing cuts in funding and services. I have been informed that university language centres in Greece have been closed recently as part of the ‘spending review’, a euphemistic expression used frequently in Italy in its Anglicized form which invariably means reducing expenditure but perhaps sounds less negative to a non-native speaker of English by being left untranslated. A few university language centres have been closed down in Italy too, but the majority have survived, albeit with markedly lower budgets than they used to have.

My aim in this paper, then, is to highlight certain aspects of teaching and researching into English for Specific Purposes in these economically challenging times. My perspective will inevitably be coloured by my work as a teacher of English for law students and political science students for many years, as editor of the journal *ESP Across Cultures* since it began in 2004, and as Head of the Language Centre of Foggia University since 2009. Indeed, each of the three

sections that follow this introduction reflects the three different yet interrelated roles that I play as language teacher, journal editor, and organizer of CLIL courses. I start by focusing on teaching LSP at university level; I go on to examine the state of research in ESP; I then take a look at CLIL, an area of growing interest in Italy; and I draw a few conclusions.

2 Teaching LSP: the gap between rhetoric and reality

In this section I refer to Languages for Specific Purposes rather than English for Specific Purposes to underline the fact that English is not the only foreign language taught worldwide in tertiary education in specialized discourse. It is undeniable that English has rapidly become not merely the most widely spoken – and widely taught – foreign language worldwide. Indeed, as is well known, it has achieved the status of lingua franca in many spheres of communication, rather in the same way as Latin did among the cultured classes of medieval Europe. But English has by no means swept the board, and various other languages – notably French, Spanish, German, Arabic, Russian and Chinese – are also widely taught, and in some cases the numbers are growing, often as a result of conjunctural economic circumstances.

If we were to believe the rhetoric of politicians who never fail to stress the importance of investing in education, we would imagine a rosy future for those involved in the field of education. As we know, reality is completely different, and governments in many EU countries, left and right, have in fact imposed drastic financial restrictions on education, which has meant that many teachers in higher education are forced to focus principally on how to survive than on how to improve their teaching and research. Meanwhile, even in a period of prolonged economic crisis, globalization encroaches ever more on our daily lives, and ministerial demands on higher education are strongly oriented towards ‘internationalization’ which, pragmatically speaking, often means trying to attract students from non-EU countries to come and study at our universities since this has proved to be a lucrative business.

So on the one hand we are encouraged to internationalize, while on the other the amenities we offer which could play a major role in stimulating internationalization, such as the services provided by university language centres, have to be run on ever smaller budgets, in some cases leading to closure. Such has been the case in Italy, where a few university language centres have indeed been closed, though most have survived to date, albeit with a reduced staff, mostly on short-term contracts. The cuts have inevitably forced these university language centres to adapt rapidly in order to keep going.

To give a simple example of the gap between rhetoric and reality: in Italy English is now a compulsory exam in all faculties (now known as departments in a recent change introduced to reduce administrative costs: in the past faculties also had departments, which created an extra layer of administration). But even today, in the vast majority of non-humanities departments – e.g. medicine, science, engineering, computer science, agrarian studies, but also in law and economics departments – English is taught by a (very poorly paid) contract teacher and the exam is simply evaluated as pass/fail with no mark, sometimes for as little as 3 credits. In law departments over 90% of English courses are taught by contract teachers. Only a small minority of teaching staff (including myself) are established researchers or associate or full professors who work as full-time teachers of English in law departments.

Another long-standing problem in Italy concerns the status of native-speaker language teachers. Known as CEL (*Collaboratori ed esperti linguistici*), and formerly as *lettori*, these

native-speaker language teachers, who do the bulk of the teaching on English courses, are poorly paid and have no career prospects (for a brief history of the role of CEL/*lettori* in the Italian university system see Gilbert 2013). In recent years the situation has deteriorated further, and prospects are very gloomy, with hardly any new CEL being taken on. Many have fought and won legal battles against their university administrations over their lowly legal status and pay. But the universities are generally unwilling to make concessions, and in some cases have tried to do away with the CEL by obliging students to obtain their language certificates outside the university.

At the same time, universities in Italy are being encouraged to provide degree courses in English only: it should be borne in mind that only a tiny percentage – 3.8% according to one estimate in 2011-12 (European Migration Network: 2012: 40) – of full-time students in Italy come from abroad, half of them from outside the EU. It is hoped that by offering English-only degree courses those numbers will increase. At universities such as Pavia or Bari degree courses in medicine are now offered in English, but they remain exceptions to the rule. A major obstacle thwarting the proliferation of such courses is the fact – normally only tacitly admitted – that the (predominantly Italian) teaching staff may not possess the necessary language skills to be able to teach their courses proficiently in English. Again, if funds were made available (that is a very big ‘if’), then *ad hoc* LSP courses could be set up for the teaching staff to provide them with suitable language skills.

If we take the case of Italy, then, we have a situation where the demand for teaching LSP is steadily growing, but with a reduced workforce where medium and long-term prospects look bleak. LSP courses are generally aimed at students who are required to do at least one English exam as part of their degree course.

By contrast, in the United Kingdom, universities thrive on the influx of international students who constitute over 21% of the student population (European Migration Network 2012: 92). One eloquent example of the consequences of this is that the Language Centre of Leeds University today caters above all for non-native speaking students wishing to acquire skills in academic English, even more than for native students wishing to learn a foreign language (Haworth 2015: 3). Of course, the downside of this from the UK’s perspective is that the interest in learning foreign languages continues to dwindle among the native population in an era that increasingly privileges English as the lingua franca of global communication. A large number of native English-speakers tend to expect non-native speakers to be able to communicate in English, and foreign language learning is increasingly viewed as a waste of time and effort.

The overall situation in Italy, then, is highly contradictory. On the one hand university funding from the Ministry of Education (known as MIUR in Italy: Ministero dell’Istruzione, della Ricerca e dell’Università) is now increasingly dependent on how far each university has ‘internationalized’; on the other hand resources have been drastically reduced in precisely the area that would help universities to internationalize in a meaningful way, i.e. by providing adequate foreign language services where they are really needed.

It should also be pointed out that, as a whole, internationalization and marketization are not an ingrained part of Italian university culture. A recent study by Venuti and Nasti (forthcoming) has shown that Italian university websites, unlike those in the UK, are more concerned with describing what the university does rather than trying to persuade potential students, be they

foreign or Italian, to enrol. The discourse adopted on Italian university websites still tends to be descriptive and bureaucratic rather than persuasive and promotional.

I see no easy way out of this *impasse*: only by constantly pointing out and publicizing the urgency and benefits of increasing investment in foreign language services can we hope to persuade the powers that be that the long-term return in the outlay will outweigh the initial burden of providing the necessary resources at a time when cuts are being made across the board in all public sectors. Unfortunately, academia in Italy has only limited and largely ineffectual lobbying powers.

3 Research in ESP: a healthier picture

If the situation concerning the teaching of LSP reveals some critical areas within a general context of growth in terms of demand and shrinkage in terms of supply, the outlook for research in ESP – both in Italy and in general – would appear to be much more positive. In this section I will restrict my remarks mainly to ESP rather than to LSP as a whole as I am in a better position to evaluate what is happening in ESP research than I am for other languages.

There are various possible reasons for this encouraging scenario in the field of research. Firstly, its vibrancy could be seen as the result of the ongoing wave of globalization and internationalization, particularly in the spheres of business, industry and technology, which entails enabling increasing numbers of (preferably multilingual) professionals with specialized skills to be proficient in their language use. The phenomenon of ESP arguably became a major concern for practitioners – teachers and researchers of English – from the 1950s onwards (see Johns 2013 for an overview), as American-fuelled business interests penetrated markets worldwide thus creating a market for skilled professionals in specialized fields with a good knowledge of English, initially in the field of English for Science and Technology. Globalization has continued relentlessly since then, and the rise and spread of the Internet has accelerated this process. Researchers in ESP – particularly applied linguists in the earlier stages of its development – have been quick to respond to this ever-growing phenomenon of globalization, providing needs analyses and syllabus design and pinpointing the differences between the various branches of ESP, and this has led to a proliferation of coursebooks from English for oil and gas professionals to English for lawyers. Since the 1960s ESP has played a major role in EFL teaching, particularly in the adult world.

Secondly, and closely linked to the previous point, the specialized language skills required by these (would-be or already established) professionals (be they in the field of finance, medicine, IT, or engineering), and hence the kind of language tuition being provided, tend to be of a pre-eminently practical nature. This has conveniently coincided with – and possibly been a concurrent factor in – an evolution in English language studies as a whole. Over the last few decades we have witnessed a major shift of focus in research away from abstract, theoretical issues pertaining to linguistics in general, such as Chomsky's transformational-generative grammar. With the spread of corpora and the focus on real language – Sinclair's maxim "trust the text" (2004) was to become the byword for a new generation of linguists – rather than on hypothetical instances of language, much language research today is concerned with identifying various aspects of ESP. One need merely browse through the plethora of ESP-related acronyms that have sprouted up in recent decades, from e-ME (electronic Medical English) to EOP (English

for Occupational Purposes) or ERPP (English for Research Publication Purposes), to have an idea of how vigorously ESP has expanded (see Williams 2014: 139-140).

Thirdly, within ESP in general, probably the most dynamic growth area has been in English for Academic Purposes. The groundbreaking work of scholars such as John Swales (e.g. 1990), Ann Johns (e.g. 2002) and Ken Hyland (e.g. 2000) has spawned a multitude of research papers and volumes on this phenomenon. And there is no sign of a decline in scholarly interest: quite the opposite.

Thus, today, studies in ESP are flourishing in both of the strands that I have identified elsewhere as co-existing in contemporary ESP research (Williams 2014: 140-141): the first strand is learner-centred and applies to teaching EFL; the second strand is a theoretical area of investigation in its own right which does not necessarily take into account the needs of learners. If the former strand still tends to constitute the core interest of ESP, the latter seems to be developing with considerable buoyancy.

After painting a gloomy picture concerning the state of ESP teaching in higher education in Italy, I am pleased to say that in terms of investigations into ESP Italy has proved to be one of the leaders in the field with a number of excellent centres of ESP studies, including CERLIS (Centro di Ricerca sui Linguaggi Specialistici) coordinated by Maurizio Gotti in Bergamo, and the Doctoral School in English for Specific Purposes coordinated by Gabriella Di Martino at the Università 'Federico II' in Naples, not forgetting CLAVIER (Corpus and Language Variation in Research Group) coordinated by Marina Bondi in Modena-Reggio Emilia, where seminars and conference proceedings are often on ESP-related matters. There are also a number of well-established annual or biennial conferences and proceedings in specific areas of LSP, such as the Centre for Research in Language and Law coordinated by Girolamo Tessuto of the Seconda Università di Napoli. And among the majority of younger researchers of English in Italy, ESP constitutes one of the most vibrant areas of study.

The continued growth in demand for ESP courses and the unabated success and vigour of ESP research, however, come with a warning that may be worth bearing in mind. It can be posited that it is precisely the predominance of neoliberal thought in this globalized world, with its belief in the primacy of economic and financial criteria before all else, that has led to the widely accepted idea that tertiary education should focus on providing pragmatic professional skills rather than offering intellectual tools for critical analysis irrespective of whether they may be of use on the labour market. As LSP teachers and researchers, and hence (directly or indirectly) beneficiaries of this ideology, dare we bite the hand of those who ultimately feed us? Have we (maybe subconsciously) internalized this neoliberal ideology and become an integral part of 'the system'? It is difficult not to agree that we are witnessing, and are possibly unwitting accomplices in what Fairclough (1993) termed over 20 years ago as the marketization of higher education. This marketization process, which began in earnest in the 1980s in the UK and the US during the era of Reagan and Thatcher, has become even more evident today in the midst of an economic crisis provoked precisely by those institutions that had been deregulated years ago in the name of the 'free market' and had been operating without due control. But whereas 30 years ago the marketization of higher education was seen in some quarters as a more 'practical' alternative to a commonly held view in academic circles that education and the market were often antithetical, today most academic institutions worldwide seem to have swallowed wholesale the idea that there is no choice and that academia must adapt to the demands of corporate interests or perish. Seen from a global economic perspective, as teachers and researchers of LSP in tertiary

institutions, we are all ultimately pawns in a game dictated by the demands of private corporations, which include the oligarchy of major publishing houses, both in terms of where we publish and also in terms of framing what we teach and write. The continued growth in demand for ESP, then, however gratifying this may be for us in purely professional terms, can also be seen as a victory for neoliberalism. As Gray and Block (2012 : 120) have observed: “the purpose of education from the neoliberal perspective is to service the economy through the production of human capital [...] In other words, education is re-construed as ultimately being about the production of workers with the skills and the dispositions necessary to compete in the global economy.”

4 CLIL: a new scenario

One area in language education that has been a major focus of interest in Italy in recent years is CLIL (Content and Language Integrated Learning). Although variations on the theme have existed for a long time – for example, in the United States SIOP (Sheltered Instruction Observation Protocol) is to a certain extent an approximate equivalent, and in Canada aspects of bilingual education projects in French and English are very similar to the philosophy behind CLIL – the acronym was coined as recently as 1994. The conceptual framework behind CLIL was born out of the work of the European Commission at the time relating to the creation of the ‘ideal’ European citizen who should have a knowledge of at least two EU languages besides his/her own. In little more than two decades CLIL has become a thriving area of research in numerous European countries including Spain, Finland, the Netherlands, and of course Italy, as well as in parts of Asia, notably South Korea, China and Japan, and parts of Latin America, particularly Colombia. Within the EU the first two countries to implement CLIL in schools were Luxembourg and Malta (Ruiz de Zarobe, Sierra & Gallardo del Puerto 2011: 12).

Teaching CLIL tends to differ from teaching languages for specific purposes in that the former is principally concerned with conveying the content of a non-language subject, such as mathematics or history, in a foreign language rather than focusing primarily on helping learners acquire language skills (González Ardeo 2013: 29). Furthermore, the emphasis in CLIL is more on teaching academic/scholastic discourse rather than professional discourse which, on the contrary, is often the focus of LSP courses at university level when teaching, for example, language for medical purposes or language for legal purposes. In the Italian case, as we have seen, the actual teaching of CLIL is performed by the teacher of the subject matter, not by the foreign language teacher. LSP courses, on the other hand, are usually taught by teachers of English who have generally graduated in language studies and may only have subsequently acquired a content-based knowledge of, say, medicine, IT, or agrarian studies.

In Italy CLIL has become compulsory as part of the secondary school syllabus since 2014-15. In other words, part of at least one non-language subject, such as mathematics, physics, geography, history or even physical education, taught in the final years of secondary school (the rules change slightly from one type of secondary school to another) must be taught in a foreign language, generally English, but there are also cases of French, German or Spanish being used. This entails training those teachers of non-language subjects so that they not only have the necessary language skills (they are required to reach C1 level of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages awarded by a recognized certification board such as Cambridge for English or DELF for French) but also the necessary methodological approach.

The Italian Ministry of Education has entrusted these ‘CLIL Methodological courses’ exclusively to University Language Centres.

The compulsory introduction of CLIL in the secondary school syllabus means that there has been a huge interest on the part of school teachers, language teachers and university language staff in terms of organizing courses, workshops, and finding suitable material to use in class.

CLIL – known as EMILE (Enseignement d’une matière par intégration d’une langue étrangère) in its French version – arguably adds a new direction and dimension to LSP teaching and research. The latter is generally thought of as belonging mainly to the realm of higher education, whereas with CLIL the focus broadens to include schools – there is even vague talk of introducing CLIL in primary schools in Italy – and not just higher education. Clearly, each country has its own approach to CLIL, but in its Italian version it is above all secondary schools that are involved.

The fact that the teaching of CLIL in schools in Italy is to be carried out by specially trained non-language teachers rather than by language teachers has been controversial. Foreign language teachers working in schools are not directly involved, though they may collaborate with CLIL teachers if they wish to. This has inevitably led to some ill-feeling on the part of foreign language teachers who consider that they have been sidelined. On the other hand, it has meant that teaching foreign language skills is no longer the exclusive ‘property’ of foreign language teachers and is broadening out to include non-language teachers as well. Hence there is a wider interest in schools in foreign languages than there used to be, which can also be beneficial to society as a whole, particularly in a country such as Italy which has not been renowned for its prowess in speaking foreign language unlike a number of other countries in northern and eastern Europe (the UK is of course a noteworthy exception).

The Italian version is thus an example of what is known as ‘hard CLIL’ as opposed to ‘soft CLIL’: the latter refers to when the content-based teaching is carried out by the foreign language teacher. This new scenario in secondary education has aroused considerable interest, particularly on the part of non-language teachers, many of whom have been teaching their subject matter for a long time and have welcomed this opportunity and challenge to give fresh input to their teaching, even if conditions are far from ideal given the scarcity of financial resources available and the reluctance on the part of the Ministry to give any kind of official recognition (monetary or in terms of career progression) to those who successfully complete the training course and reach a certified C1 level of language knowledge.

Many of these non-language teachers are in search of suitable teaching material and workable theoretical approaches to CLIL teaching. Inevitably, besides looking at the burgeoning area of studies specifically devoted to CLIL, this often means investigating the field of LSP (especially the practical teaching-based part of it), given that there is a consolidated body of research on teaching LSP which, despite the differences in underlying philosophy, has a lot in common with CLIL. Hence the readership of LSP research is broadening, and the boundary between CLIL and LSP is becoming hazier. It has even been hypothesized (González Ardeo 2013: 24) that in some countries CLIL at university level is now prioritized with respect to LSP in terms of the resources being allocated to it.

5 Conclusions

Summing up, then, I have outlined three diverse yet interrelated narratives concerning the evolution of ESP teaching and research in these economically challenging times. We have observed that on the one hand demand for ESP tuition continues to grow while supply is adversely affected by economic restrictions. And it would appear that for the foreseeable future the only strategy that we can employ to alleviate this situation is to continually pressurize the decision-makers not only in education but in general to highlight the benefits of investing in ESP, not just to have more qualified national graduates but also as a means of attracting growing numbers of students from abroad.

Research in ESP, as we have seen, is thriving. However, there is always the danger of resting on one's laurels and, as I have pointed out elsewhere (Williams 2014: 147), researchers should make sure that their work is always innovative, providing new insights into ESP. This in turn merges into the third point that I discussed, namely the rapidly expanding area known as CLIL, where I have outlined the potential of exploring the connections between CLIL and ESP. Given that CLIL was born in the midst of the revolution in information technology in the 1990s and is in many ways fuelled by the idea of using technology as part of its underlying ethos, there is always scope for trying out new ways of teaching and doing research in CLIL.

CLIL, of course, is only one ESP-related area where there is potential for growth. As societies continue along the path of ever greater specialization, coupled with ongoing technologization, LSP would appear to have a healthy future guaranteed for it, and will doubtless be able to adapt to new demands as they arise. Whether greater resources will be allocated to LSP to allow teachers and researchers to make the most of these new opportunities is, of course, largely beyond our control, but we should try at least to make ourselves heard. In the meantime, in attempting to understand the significance of LSP in this rapidly changing world, we need to preserve a critical spirit which, in my view, means questioning the (disingenuously simplistic) logic that the market rules supreme, and holding on to the belief that human intellectual endeavour cannot simply be put to the service of an oligarchy of powerful business interests whose *raison d'être* is profit rather than the furtherance of knowledge.

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