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English as a Lingua Franca in the Academic Context: The Role of University Language Centres

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1. Introduction

Globalisation and the intensification of worldwide relations have inevitably called to the fore the question of the choice of the language to be used for contacts among people living in widely different places in the world. Lingua francas, that is "contact languages used among people who do not share a first language" (Jenkins, Cogo, Dewey 2011, 281) have been in use for a long time (House 2014) and Sanskrit, Greek, Latin and other languages were once used with this function. In present times, the task of being a lingua franca that can be used universally has fallen upon English, which has thus become the preferred medium for international communication in many contexts.

As a matter of fact, English is now the dominant language in the higher education sector in Europe, as can be seen from objective indicators such as the growing number of degree programmes which use English as a medium

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of instruction (Gotti 2014). Teaching subjects through the medium of English (English Medium Instruction or EMI) is widely considered to be an essential tool in the internationalization policies of universities in many non-English-speaking countries. If on the one hand this has opened up new opportunities for learning the various discourses related to the specialised disciplines taught, on the other hand it has also aroused dilemmas connected with language proficiency and the level of content competence acquired by the students. Moreover, the introduction of EMI in a university also raises a series of questions and challenges as to the accreditation and training of teaching staff. What level of English should teachers have in order to teach their subjects through English at university? What methodological skills are involved in teaching through another language? How can teachers be trained for teaching through English?

University language centres can play a fundamental role in providing answers and custom-tailored solutions for the above mentioned issues, thus preventing the members of the academic staff from feeling pushed towards teaching through English "[…] in order to survive in the academic environment" (Cots 2013, 116), without a great deal of training and preparation.

The present contribution reports on the activities implemented by the Language Centre of the University of Modena and Reggio Emilia in order to assist those members of the teaching staff (lecturers) who are confronted with the inherent challenges of teaching through English on a daily basis, and also highlights possible future avenues of research and instances of best practices.

The Language Centre of the University of Modena and Reggio Emilia has been entrusted by the central offices with the task of developing training courses for the lecturers willing to teach their subjects through the medium of English. These courses have been going on successfully for some time now, with a positive feedback from the attendees. However, in order to better fine-tune the course-designing process, it was considered necessary to enrich it with insights from the lecturers' personal experience.

Accordingly, it was decided to interview some of the lecturers who had taught their courses in English in the academic year 2017-2018, with a view to using the collected evidence as the starting point for validating and possibly improving the training courses syllabus. L1, L2 and L3 accepted to take part in the study. L1's course deals with legal issues, L2's course centers on the delivery of services to companies, while L3's course focuses on marketing strategies.

2. English Medium Instruction

The importance of English Medium Instruction (EMI) would now appear to be an undisputed reality in European Higher Education, as English is fast becoming a popular educational medium also at universities with a long-standing tradition of using their national languages for all academic purposes (Smit and Dafouz 2012). Teaching subjects through the medium of English is believed to support the internationalization of universities, to make study programmes more accessible and attractive to international students and to improve the foreign language skills and employability prospects of local graduates (Coleman 2006; Dearden 2014).

However, the continued growth of EMI also raises a series of challenges and questions for universities [1]. The impetus on European institutions to offer a wide range of subjects through English inevitably raises the issue of whether a sufficient number of teachers are capable of teaching content in the second language. Although recent European survey data revealed that 95% of EMI programme directors rated the English proficiency of their teaching staff involved in English programmes as good or very good (Wächter and Maiworms 2014), other reviews of current practice have highlighted a need for a more structured and rigorous approach to the language and methodology training of teachers (Dearden 2014; Halbach and Lázaro 2015).

2.1. EMI in Italy

The turn of the millennium has seen a dramatic increase in English-medium instruction (EMI) programmes offered by universities throughout Europe and in particular in southern European countries including Italy (Campagna and Pulcini 2014). The introduction of EMI-taught courses in Italian HE dates back to the 1990s (Pulcini and Campagna 2015, 72). In accordance with the principles set forth in the Bologna Declaration, Italian HE has committed itself to strengthening its ability to attract international students in order to be more competitive in the global HE scenario. Pulcini and Campagna (2015, 71-72) argue that "Italy is a very attractive country for international students, not only for its Mediterranean environment and flavour, but especially

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[1] For more information on the pitfalls and challenges that universities implementing EMI courses and programmes, as well as pedagogical issues methodological implications that may arise, see Doiz, Lasagabaster, and Sierra 2013.

because university fees and the cost of living provide a good opportunity to benefit from the ongoing process of internationalization of higher education".

Carfagna and Cavallini (2016) report on a recent study carried out by CRUI (Conferenza dei Rettori delle Università Italiane)[2] according to which in the academic year 2016-2017 682 EMI *post-lauream* courses (i.e. Master's degree courses, PhD courses and Winter/Summer schools) were offered in 60 Italian universities. In particular, the study shows that EMI was used in 271 PhD courses, followed by 219 Winter/Summer Schools and 192 Master's degree courses. The study highlights a clear prevalence of EMI-taught courses in two main areas: on the one hand "Economics and Statistics", with as many as 121 EMI courses being delivered; on the other hand "Industrial and Information Engineering", with 109 EMI courses on offer. Moreover, the study also confirms, as already pointed out by Dimova, Hultgren and Jensen (2015, 3-4), "that EMI is significantly more widespread at master's level than at undergraduate level, reflecting, partly, a greater degree of commodification at master's level with European institutions competing to attract non-EU fee-paying students for master's programmes in particular".

The provision of EMI-taught courses in Italian HE has grown exponentially in recent times, leading to growing numbers of 'bilingual' graduates, who attend lessons which show a clear-cut focus on content over language (Costa and Coleman 2013).

Santulli (2015, 271) claims that "the push to go international in the Italian academia […] boils down to a competition among universities to start new programmes taught in English". While this might surely be the case for the majority of Italian universities, there are also other arguments in favour of EMI. For instance, EMI can make didactic methods more innovative and contribute to the renewal of course planning. In addition, since English is a straight-to-the-point language like no other one, it perfectly fits the requirements of scientific fields of study (Santulli 2015).

Alongside these and other justifications for the presence of EMI in Italian universities, many arguments against it have also been raised. It goes without saying that the issue of English as a Medium of Instruction (EMI) can be highly controversial especially when and if its implementation implies abandoning the national language completely (Molino and Campagna 2014). However, even if we are well aware of them, we decided not to dwell on them as they fall beyond the scope of the present analysis.

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[2] CRUI is the Conference of Italian University Rectors.

3. EMI TEACHER DEVELOPMENT COURSES AT THE UNIVERSITY OF MODENA AND REGGIO EMILIA: LECTURING IN ENGLISH

The University of Modena and Reggio Emilia launched their teacher education courses in 2011 in order to face the challenge of equipping teaching staff with the tools needed to internationalize their courses. The language centre now offers three courses annually: Lecturing in English I, the core module of teacher education for EMI in HE; Lecturing in English II, a follow-up methodological course based on participant needs and Lecturing in English III, providing language improvement and accuracy practice for academic teaching staff.

The first Lecturing in English courses were conceived following discussion and reflection between the language centre staff and the university internationalization office and were devised as a means of training in-service lecturers either already teaching in English, or intending to do so in the future. A system of financial incentives was approved for course participants so that on successful completion of the programme participants would benefit from a financial contribution for a period of three years for research purposes or preparing their English taught curriculum.

Lecturing in English I employs a team teaching approach using an Italian professor in Applied Linguistics and a native speaker language teaching expert and consists of a series of fifteen sessions culminating in a final peer-assessed practical teaching assignment. A main thrust of the course is the 'Lecture as a Genre' (Swales 1993) considering the rhetorical features of the lecture before moving on to focus on the micro-analysis of linguistic features of lectures in particular pedagogical strategies and teaching of subject specific lexis. With this approach to university instruction, participants analyse videos of lectures, transcripts and academic corpora during their input sessions. In contrast, the lessons with the native speaker language teacher are of a more practical language and methodology awareness-raising thrust, aimed at introducing communicative teaching strategies. Areas such as correct pronunciation, lexis and collocation, use of multi-media in the classroom, lesson and curriculum planning are covered.

In order to complete Lecturing in English I, along with a satisfactory quota of attendance, participants must complete a final evaluated task which involves the preparation and delivery of a portion of a lesson in English in the presence of their classmates. Comments on the lesson from the teacher trainers, their observing peers and a post-lesson reflection by the participant

contributes to the creation of a personal feedback document, providing a final synthesis of evaluation. The peer-assessment element is "dependent on establishing collegial trust and respect" (Atkinson and Bolt 2012). Moreover, on the occasion of this final task, not only can participants demonstrate their subject knowledge, language and presentation skills during the observation, but ideally they can attempt to put into practice some of the strategies for EMI teaching that they have encountered while attending the course.

4. LECTURING IN ENGLISH: II & III SUBSEQUENT COURSES

A second phase, "Lecturing in English II", launched in 2013-2014 was created in response to participants who, on completion of the first course, desired to attend, at least on a weekly basis, more sessions tailor made to their language and pedagogical needs. Led by a native speaker language teacher, the course is built around lecturers' specific requirements as they begin to operate in the realities of EMI. The curriculum therefore emerges from a needs analysis so that "Lecturing in English II", attended on a voluntary basis, evolves in response to participants' real needs. Practical issues such as assessment literacy and assessment types offered on an English taught course are considered in addition to other pedagogical issues such as materials design and development, improving classroom interaction, dealing with large classes, reformulation and paraphrasing strategies and less concrete concerns such as the meeting of student needs and expectations and the new challenges of the multi-cultural classroom. During the meetings, participants are again invited to teach a portion of a lesson to their fellow lecturers, on a voluntary basis, in order to receive informal feedback on their teaching skills.

A third phase of the teacher training cycle was added in 2016: Lecturing in English – Language improvement and Accuracy and was specifically requested by former course participants. This module consists of a series of traditional language lessons encompassing the revision of grammatical structures, undertaking listening tasks and a focusing on pronunciation and fluency in an academic context, suitable for lecturers with varying language levels and linguistic experience.

The evolution of this three-pronged approach to EMI teacher education at the University of Modena and Reggio Emilia has demonstrated how the institution itself has been responsive to the emerging needs of the teaching

demands of EMI in the local context. The courses have evolved and reflected participants' needs and their enthusiasm in attending courses: first a core co-taught module, a second course emerging from practical teaching needs and a third module to improve specific language skills.

5. THE LECTURERS' INTERVIEWS

Lecturers are perhaps the most important stakeholders in EMI (Dearden and Macaro 2016), as EMI-taught programmes just would not exist if there were no lecturers willing to take on the challenge of teaching their disciplinary contents through English. This is why, when designing training courses for future EMI lecturers, it is important to pay attention to their teaching beliefs and above all to their perceived needs in a variety of teaching contexts.

Lecturers' attitudes towards EMI have been investigated and evaluated in several studies focusing on EMI practice around the world. Dearden and Macaro (2016) carried out a series of interviews with lecturers and tutors teaching in EMI in three European countries, namely Italy, Austria and Poland. Their main objective was to compare their opinions on a detailed series of aspects related to the EMI phenomenon: the introduction of EMI programmes in their universities, the need to internationalize, the entry level of English that lecturers and students should demonstrate, the implementation of resources and the support for EMI lecturers.

Differently from Dearden and Macaro's (2016) multipurpose list of questions, the present study refers to a series of open-ended questions focusing on a single aspect of EMI, namely its teaching methodology. The questions [3] formed the backbone of L1's, L2's and L3's semi-structured interviews. They were meant to make them reflect on their personal experience (questions 1-3), methodological choices (questions 4-6) and adopted communicative strategies (questions 7-10); as well as to elicit their needs and opinions (questions 11-13).

1) How long have you been using English as a medium of instruction?
2) Do you feel comfortable in using English as a medium of instruction?
3) In your opinion, what are the advantages and disadvantages of using English as a medium of instruction?

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[3] The questions were devised by a master's degree programme student, VR, under the supervision of one of the authors of the present contribution.

4) Do you think your teaching methodology has changed as a result of using English as a medium of instruction? Why? How?
5) Are there any aspects of your L1 teaching methodology you feel you have improved by means of EMI?
6) Are there any strategies you consciously use in your EMI teaching methodology?
7) Compared to your L1 lectures, do you think your EMI lectures are more student-oriented? Why?
8) Compared to your L1 lectures, do you think your EMI lectures are more cooperative? Why?
9) Do cooperation and negotiation of meaning play a role in your EMI lectures?
10) Do you ever use your L1? Why?
11) What type of support should EMI lecturers get to develop their EMI teaching techniques?
12) How do you think a lecturer can become good enough to use English as a medium of instruction?
13) How would you rate your recent EMI teaching experience on a 1-10 scale?

It was decided to use open-ended questions in order to let the lecturers speak at length about their experiences and needs, so as to establish whether or not their opinions confirmed the choices that had been made in terms of course design and activities. The lecturers were interviewed by VR in February 2018. The interviews lasted no more than 25 minutes each. They were recorded and subsequently transcribed. On a few occasions the lecturers asked the interviewer to provide more details on the meanings of certain specialized terms, like for instance: student-orientation, cooperative approach. Once these explanations had been provided, the conversation was immediately resumed.

5.1. The lecturers' opinions

The first three questions of the questionnaire were used to provide some background information about each of the lecturers. By looking at the answers provided we learn that L1 and L3 have been using EMI respectively for a period of four and two years. L2 has been using it for the last three years with students who had specialized knowledge in his subject, and only for one

year with students who had no specialized knowledge. All three members of the academic staff had therefore had time to reflect on the content of their courses, the impact on the students and to modify and adapt course delivery or material where necessary.

Now L1 feels more comfortable about EMI than in the past, after spending considerable time on redrafting the contents of his course. In fact, in his first year he simply translated contents from Italian into English and the feedback from the students was far from enthusiastic. He believes that EMI is time-consuming for teachers, in that they have to develop brand new communication strategies and also improve their proficiency in English. It is also a challenge, since there is the risk that the lessons may at times result a bit confusing and not of the same quality as when they are taught in Italian. However, EMI also enables the lecturer to join a larger community of scholars. Clearly L1 has affirmed the need to resist the temptation of transferring and translating an Italian taught course into English. Adjustments in content delivery, pacing and speed and intensity of teaching must be factored into an English taught programme.

L2 feels relatively comfortable in adopting EMI. In fact, his major problem concerns the type of audience he is addressing, as he states that with laymen students a teacher has to start from the foundations of the discipline, without taking anything for granted, and he/she is often unable to go straight to the point, because of the students' lack of background knowledge. In his case, he thinks that EMI is particularly suited, on the grounds of the close connection between the topics of his lectures and the English-speaking world. Naturally the lecturer must be aware of the level of specialist knowledge known by the student audience as teaching a completely new disciplinary area to non-expert students requires careful planning and delivery and conscious language choices. Confidence and proficiency in the target teaching language is crucial as on occasion a teacher can decide against using a particular example because he/she is unable to express it in English, as a consequence of his less-than-perfect mastery of the language.

L3 like L1 states that he felt more comfortable after his first year, in that the whole experience had a learning-by-doing character. Reflection on the success of a course is crucial for the teacher in order to fine-tune and improve the course in successive years. In his opinion, the main advantage offered by EMI is the chance to reach a greater audience, as a teacher can deliver courses also to non-Italian speakers, echoing the advent of EMI as a multicultural learning context becoming widespread across Italy. However, he is aware that

teaching in a different language could be difficult for both the teacher and the students, who have to make a greater effort when using a language which is not their own, pinpointing the evident cognitive load experienced by teacher and learner alike when involved in an EMI learning event.

The answers provided by the lecturers clearly show that they are aware of how EMI has made them re-think the contents of their courses and adapt a different teaching mode. They all agree on the fact that their EMI teaching methodology is somehow different from the one they use when teaching in Italian. L1 argues that teaching in English has made him "rethink of the contents" and use "multimedia contents" as a support during his lectures. L2 claims that in his EMI lectures he tries to "force a bit more [sic] the students to be involved in the discussion" by using exercises and open questions. L3 maintains that when teaching in EMI it is important to "pay much more attention to the contents themselves" and to be "clearer in the way you teach", and he also adds that he draws extensively on practical examples to achieve that goal. Moreover, he has also realized that he tends to use different examples when teaching in English or in Italian.

So, while L1 and L3 state that in their EMI lectures they tend to focus more on the way they deliver contents, L2 focuses his attention on the addressees of his lectures and stresses the importance of the shift he decided to make from the lecture-based typical approach to the "team-work approach" that he uses in his EMI lectures.

When it comes to the type of support that EMI lecturers can get to develop their EMI teaching techniques, they provided the following answers [4]:

1) L1: "the university in a very initial stage provided for open courses for EMI teachers […] they were multidisciplinary I think that a good support could be or teachers of the same subject matter so teachers in economics teachers in law so that we can share also our vocabulary and our contents that are quite close one to another so if I go to a meeting and share knowledge with someone from economics it doesn't match because his vocabulary his structure of the lecture are quite different from mine so he won't be of help say the pronunciation whatever but these meetings are not intended for improving your pronunciation but just to focus on the contents so I think that yearly meeting conferences just for the teachers in that specific field could be of use just to share our difficulties and our solutions in that that are not transversal"

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[4] The answers of the three lecturers are quoted verbatim. No attempts have been made to improve the structure or the punctuation of their statements.

2) L2: "OK not at the beginning but after the lecture there were a special how can I say lecture for professors involved in EMI lectures basically […] it's quite useful for what I saw I think three four lectures it was pretty useful"

3) L3: "yeah for sure that's a key point […] a sound background in languages is something that I mean it's important and I mean I know that universities as institutions provide to their own lecturers or professors a strong an important support in the sense of improving their EMI language so that's I mean again time is needed this could be a long process so time is needed to improve and to make practice as well"

Evidently, the courses that the university is able to provide for EMI lecturers are highly regarded and perceived as important. However, each of the three lecturers holds very personal positions for what concerns possible improvements to be implemented. L1 for instance stresses the importance of focusing of the specialized discourses of different disciplines. He suggests organizing subject-specific meetings, so as to provide lecturers of the same discipline with an occasion for exchanging ideas and opinions. L2 and L3 are more concerned with the mastery of the language and with the need to practise it thereby confirming the need for concrete language improvement opportunities to be provided by the institution on a regular basis as part of an ongoing professional and linguistic development strategy.

4) L2: "with the English as a Lingua Franca you don't have the richness of your mother tongue language so sometimes the risk is that you lose something"

5) L3: "you have to think more carefully about what you are referring to and the examples and so on so probably it's a kind of effort also for the teacher that have to deal with OK the same topics you already know but in a slightly different way which is just based on the different language adopted"

6) L3: "practising practising practising I know you have just to try try and try again yeah learning-by-doing is the best thing that could happen"

6. FURTHER IMPROVEMENTS IN EMI AT THE UNIVERSITY OF MODENA AND REGGIO EMILIA

Building on the feedback drawn from the interviews to our EMI lecturers and the experience of our teacher training specialists it is possible to outline possible improvements to the Language Centre's EMI training programme. The aim of this section is therefore to present some solutions and initiatives to

help lecturers feel more comfortable when teaching and specifically improve discipline-specific communication and language proficiency.

As pointed out in the interviews, lecturers in EMI may feel to a certain extent that they "lose something" when not teaching using their mother tongue, as reported by L2, and the main cause for this sense of loss may go back to their perceived need for more preparation and practice with English language, which is hinted at by L3: "a sound back ground in languages [...] it's important"; and, more specifically, the sense of not being sufficiently prepared can be attributed to the specific request of sharing their experience and doubts among colleagues of similar or related disciplines, as described by L1 "focus on contents [and] meeting [at] conferences just for the teachers in that specific field".

Our main concern with EMI is to be able to maintain and monitor the quality of teaching in a context such as ours, where most of the lecturers are non native speakers of English, so as to prevent first of all the risk of students falling behind (Valcke and Wilkinson 2017) and at the same time be able to support our lecturers with instruments and initiatives that may encourage them and improve both their teaching skills and their proficiency in English.

First of all, we would like to provide a personalized support to lecturers through a "Sportello per i corsi in inglese" (*English Taught Programs Desk*), which will guarantee that lecturers find a one-on-one support service. The *Sportello* is meant to receive a small number of requests from a limited number of lecturers (we believe the number will be maximum 10 lecturers per year), who will be able to get personalized feedback and assistance in teaching techniques, language proficiency, students' assessment, etc.

Secondly, it is our intention to offer special workshops (short, every two weeks) and summer schools (week-long) aimed at bringing scholars and lecturers of similar disciplines together offering the possibility to colleagues from other parts of Italy, Europe and the rest of the world, where EMI courses have been offered, to come to Modena and share their experiences, share ideas and strategies. These initiatives will constitute not only a good opportunity for our lecturers to meet with colleagues and discuss the specific aspects related to teaching in English, but also, and most importantly, they will become a forum for an international discussion and evaluation of the whole process of offering English Taught Courses.

Thirdly, building on the experience of one of our teacher training specialists within the pilot project E3TQM (Total Quality Management) carried out by a group of lecturers on a Master course in Electronic Engineering at

the University of Modena and Reggio Emilia, we will try to promote peer observation projects among lecturers of similar disciplines, who are willing to share their teaching experiences and exchange views, opinions and ideas about classroom management, lesson planning, materials creation, etc. and to have the quality of their spoken performance confirmed.

The above mentioned initiatives are meant on the one hand to increase assistance for our lecturers and, at the same time to create a set of tools which will constitute the basis for good practice in the creation of EMI courses at the University of Modena and Reggio Emilia. On the other hand, we realize that we will need to monitor and validate results of the implementation of these tools in order to evaluate the real enhancements in terms of quality of teaching.

7. Conclusion

The European Union has been committed to promoting the international attractiveness of its HE system. In trying to achieve this goal, Europe has experienced an exponential growth of EMI-taught courses. Italian HE is part of this picture and is proving to be one of the European countries where EMI is spreading more significantly. By looking at the impressive expansion shown by EMI courses in recent times, professor Ernesto Macaro, director of the Centre for Research and Development in English Medium Instruction at the University of Oxford, has compared EMI to "an unstoppable train", more specifically he argues that

> The issues and challenges facing any institution adopting EMI are consider-able […]. Nevertheless my understanding of the current situation is that it is an unstoppable train. Better therefore that we do everything we can to keep it on the rails and allow its passengers to reach their destinations safely than try to block its passage. (Macaro 2015, 7)

EMI is not going to come to a halt, on the contrary it will spread even more in the near future. It will therefore elicit a lot of attention from different people who will examine and scrutinize it, sometimes obstructing its passage. The passengers (lecturers and students) of the train will therefore have to adjust to the speed and the duration of the journey, in order for them, to safely reach their final destination, i.e. good teaching strategies and good learning out-

comes. At the same time ticket collectors (universities) should invigilate and implement all the necessary measures that will allow the train to run smoothly.

To conclude, teaching in EMI is not perceived to be as easy and, most importantly, as natural as teaching in one's mother tongue. It can turn into a really demanding activity, one which needs complete and careful restructuring of the contents and of the strategies of the course. It can be extremely demanding, because lecturers are faced with the constraints of expressing concepts in a language which is not their mother tongue. Despite these difficulties, teaching in EMI is supposed to become somehow "easier" with the passing of time. Moreover, EMI experience can also prove important for the positive influence it exerts on courses delivered in Italian.

The present contribution had a two-fold aim: to provide a description of the activites organized by the language centre at the University of Modena and Reggio Emilia and to gather insights into the language training needs of the university teaching staff, so as to validate and/or modify the syllabus of the training courses provided.

The evidence collected on the occasion of the present study is of course quite limited and cannot claim to provide any general indications and guidelines. However, it offers a few indications. In the first place we learnt that the lecturers value the training activities provided by the University. At the same time they feel the need for disciplinary sessions, so as to be able to concentrate on each discipline's specialized vocabulary. In this way they could interact with colleagues and improve their disciplinary vocabulary. Moreover, they seem to be willing to get involved in task-based activities, so as to be able to learn by doing. Also problem solving activities might be suitable, as these would allow them to actively engage in tasks which require them to use and practice the English language.

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ABSTRACT

English is now the dominant language in the higher education sector in Europe, as can be seen from objective indicators such as the growing number of degree programmes which use English as a medium of instruction. Teaching subjects through the medium of English (English Medium Instruction or EMI) may raise a series of questions and challenges for what concerns the accreditation and training of teaching staff. University language centres can play a fundamental role in helping the academic staff from feeling pushed towards teaching through English without a great deal of training and preparation. The present contribution reports on the activities implemented by the Language Centre in order to assist those members of the teaching staff (lecturers) who are confronted with the inherent challenges of teaching through English on a daily basis, and also highlights possible future avenues of research and instances of best practices.