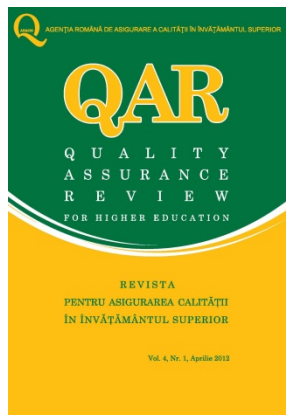




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## Quality Assurance Review For Higher Education

*Learning from the Learners: a student centred syllabus  
in preparation for the real world*

**Catherine Elizabeth Riley**

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# Learning from the Learners: a student centred syllabus in preparation for the real world

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## Abstract

*In order to meet the demands of our interconnected world, many universities have embraced the concept of internationalisation, offering international programmes in many discipline areas. At the same time, European universities have been grappling with introducing all the necessary changes to meet with the Bologna requirements. At the level of both programme and syllabus design the focus has often been on specific knowledge and understanding and the setting of very laudable learning outcomes including professional competences and skills. How Language Learning/Support can play an important role in achieving these objectives and outcomes and in particular how a student-centred “professional syllabus” can be developed to meet future needs of the student is the focus of this talk.*

*Language Learning/Support on International or Foreign Language Mediated (FLM) Programmes, whether credit-bearing or not, needs to meet three main needs: Language for Academic Purposes (LAP) e.g. the mechanics of academic discourse, writing abstracts/dissertations, making presentations etc; Language for Specific Purposes (LSP) focusing on technical language, in particular terminology; and in addition to this more “traditional” kind of language support, Language Learning should also develop those language and communication skills and competences which will enable them to work effectively and efficiently in a professional working environment thus enhancing student employability. To answer this multifaceted challenge, the language teacher needs not only to know what the programme and individual course learning outcomes are and to work in close and constant collaboration with the content teachers (essential prerequisite) but also have some form of contact with the professional world of the specific content domain. One ideal source of up to date and relevant knowledge of this professional world is the students themselves. The Language syllabus can include “professional” tasks based on student feedback and authentic materials, provided either by current students following internships or alumni who are in contact with teachers. This invaluable input provides insight not only regarding technical aspects, but more importantly the text types most commonly found, the types of communication skills most frequently called for, the functional language (complaints, troubleshooting, requests etc) not always catered for in published LAP or LSP materials. Moreover, and perhaps more importantly, by using students and alumni as informants to create their own “professional syllabus”, motivation, that all-important ingredient in successful language learning, is greatly enhanced.*

**Keywords:** *student-centred, syllabus design, language awareness, professional communication skills*

## 1. Background

When designing a degree course a whole series of expectations, requirements and restrictions from a series of stakeholders all need to be met. From the international perspective, the impact of

Bologna has had repercussions across Europe. In the context of Italy there are also the Ministerial requirements to contend with, which often feel like a straitjacket; discipline areas are clearly delineated and degree courses fall into a rigid disciplinary frameworks and have to include certain disciplines and subjects, leaving little room for manoeuvre. There are institutional expectations and restrictions, regarding the organisation and financing of the course. There are the departmental organs deciding which courses will be offered (this is the level at which the ‘degree course pie’ is usually sliced up!). There are the individual professor’s expectations as to what exactly they will be teaching, how they will be teaching, who they will be teaching and to what end. Add to this the expectations and requirement of the workplace it is perhaps little wonder that sometimes the needs and expectations of the very people the course is intended for are overlooked. Indeed, one might ask “Who is the course for?” While the obvious answer is: The Students, in the case of International Masters the answer is not so straightforward. These courses are introduced for multiple reasons: political, to improve rankings (national and international); to attract students AND teachers – in particular international and from other national universities; to provide professors with a showcase – or even high status teaching hours; to attract funds from organisations, etc. Providing students with the ideal preparation for their chosen career or for further study at a higher level may not be top of this list, in particular when allotting courses and credits.

The students, their needs and requirements, are not alone in being left on the sideline. In degree course design, language courses, be they a credit-bearing Module or extra curricular Language Support as part of an International Master’s<sup>1</sup>, are very often an afterthought. Although languages are a compulsory element of ALL degree courses in Italy<sup>2</sup> the Ministerial restriction of 12 exams per Master’s, including the final dissertation, mean they are often relegated (in everyone’s eyes) to course requirements under the label “*conoscenze linguistiche*” rather than being afforded ‘official subject’ status, whether as a core subject (“*Caratterizzante*”) or subsidiary (“*Affine*”). Indeed, at the engineering faculty in Trento, languages are listed under ‘Other’ (“*Altro*”), almost an afterthought, at Sociology it is part of the final dissertation mark – or rather a requirement needed to be able to graduate.

Attendance at Italian university is not compulsory (this holds true for all courses in all disciplines bar medicine) and students can take an exam as many times as they like until they pass (again true for any course in any discipline bar medicine). Until recently the language courses on all non-specialist degrees, i.e. degrees in subjects other than languages, consisted in general language courses held both at the university language centre and in the faculties. Attendance rates were below 30%, meaning 70% of students sit the appropriate level exam, which comprises all 4 skills, without attending any language courses. As a result success rates were even lower than attendance rates, constituting a huge cost for the language centre. Moreover, many students were unable to graduate, sometimes for years, because unable to obtain the language requirement (at Trento usually B1 on a Bachelor’s and B2 on a Master’s). Pressure was put on the language centre by the faculties to find a solution to the problem. The Language Centre, which sets all language exams, suggested lowering the degree course requirements to A2 and B1 respectively. The reply was to leave the levels but make the exams much easier – an illustration of how meaningless, outside language teaching circles, the CEF levels actually are. Pressure was also put on the Language Centre to cut costs, in particular the huge budget for exams (the average number of times a student sat the language exam was 3.4 times).

This, then, is the backdrop to a series of decisions taken by the Language Centre’s Scientific Committee<sup>3</sup>, in particular regarding English language, which counts for over 70% of language exams in the university and over 90% at Master’s level. There were multiple, interconnected challenges to be addressed:

<sup>1</sup>The interpretations of this term vary from a course with some international students present, delivered in the local language, through courses where students spend a period abroad, to courses with a mixture of international and local students delivered wholly in a foreign language, often English. For the purposes of this paper, this latter definition is the one intended, and in the case of the University of Trento, all International Masters are delivered in English.

<sup>2</sup>Laudable in theory and an idea which would make British Universities, for example, grind to a halt with very few students able to graduate.

<sup>3</sup>*Comitato Didattico* of which the author is a member in her role as English Language Coordinator for the university (*Responsabile Scientifico Didattico della Lingua Inglese*).

- a) increasing attendance
- b) making courses relevant to the students and their real needs
- c) improving pass rates without meddling with CEF levels
- c) cutting costs
- d) getting students to do the language course(s)/exams during the degree and not the week before they hope to graduate
- e) changing the attitude of the stakeholders (**all of them**) to languages and language learning

This last being perhaps the most challenging of all. In short a change in mind-set regarding languages across the university was perceived as essential.

## 2. A student-centred approach for a student-centred syllabus

With this in mind, I wondered whether the approach I had adopted on my own language courses at the School of International Studies, greatly appreciated by the students, could be applied on International Masters (and indeed Bachelors) in other discipline areas. This approach is based on a simple premise – putting the focus on the students: both on their needs AND on their role in the learning process.

Meeting the immediate and future needs of the students has immediate implications for syllabus design, involving needs analysis, both pre-course, *in itinere* and of particular interest to me, post course. A practice I have always promoted, even when not encouraged by officialdom<sup>4</sup>. This (re)evaluation process can be summed up in the reflective-practice quality model proposed by the LANQUA project<sup>5</sup>, requiring continual dialogue with the students, both present and past, on all aspects of their learning, both for languages and other core subjects. This approach also requires continual dialogue and cooperation with professors of (the other)<sup>6</sup> core content modules, but this is not the focus of the present paper.

Before moving on to discuss ways of identifying students' immediate and future needs and incorporating these into the syllabus, I would first like to briefly discuss learning theories and approaches, and how they influence the role of the students (and teacher) in the learning process, with particular reference to learning language through content (as well as content through language).

While teacher trainers and many teachers at the primary and secondary levels may be familiar with cognitive (e.g. Pinker 1997), socio-cultural (e.g. Vygotsky 1978) and socio-cognitive (e.g. Bereiter and Scardamalia 2005) learning theories and relative teaching approaches (e.g. scaffolding - Simon and Klein, 2007, task/problem based learning – Nunan 2003, Willis & Willis 2007, interaction – Larsen-Freeman 2011, Van Lier 2007), and embrace, or at least pay lip-service to a task-based, student centred approach, teachers at university level firstly go through no teacher training (at least in the Italian context) and their perceptions of the teacher student relationship depend very much on their own experience. This can be seen, at the risk of making broad generalisations, in the way professors who have studied abroad have a more interactive, process oriented approach, rather than the product oriented, 'chalk and talk' approach of many of the more 'traditional' teachers. The focus on skills and competence development advocated by the Bologna process<sup>7</sup>, more or less overtly ignored. A teacher's beliefs about learning will affect the all-important teacher student, but also student-student relationship (if we are to consider the classroom a learning *community*). Perhaps more importantly, students' perceptions of the learning process, their role in it and the teacher-student relationship, will be very much influenced by the student's own experience. In a

<sup>4</sup>Students' own perceptions of their role in the QA cycle are similar to those of the lecturers and professors, i.e. that they 'have no role' (cfr student comments on page 4 below)

<sup>5</sup>The Quality Model is retrievable at [http://www.lanqua.eu/sites/default/files/LanQua\\_quality\\_model.pdf](http://www.lanqua.eu/sites/default/files/LanQua_quality_model.pdf).

<sup>6</sup>English was made a core content Module on the Master's in European and International Studies, upgraded from a subsidiary, at the request of the students a few years ago. This is rare in the context of Master's courses in Italy, other than specialist Language Masters.

<sup>7</sup><http://www.eassw.org/internatSW/Bologna%20as%20a%20frame%20for%20CBL%20and%20supervision.pdf>

multilingual, multicultural class these perceptions will be even more varied than in the mono-cultural classroom. What might these perceptions be, then? I suggest, somewhat tongue in cheek<sup>8</sup>, a list of learner roles as perceived by both teachers and the learners themselves: *Resisters* (unruly rabble), *Receptacles* (jugs and mugs), *Raw Material* (clay to mould), *Clients* (at their service), *Collaborators* (team spirit), *Individual explorers* (Scott vs Amundson), *Democratic Explorers* (Page and Brin<sup>9</sup>), *Partners* (we're all in it together)<sup>10</sup>. As for perceptions of the teacher, then we have a mirror image of the above<sup>11</sup>: *Enforcers* (quashing the rabble), *Distributors* (filling the pots), *Shapers* (moulding the clay), *Service Providers* (doing their bidding), *Coaches* (training the teams), *Cartographers* (setting them on their way), *Partners* (we're in it together). While at certain moments in the classroom life we might assume many of these roles, depending on the task in hand, in the socio-cultural learning approach I personally favour, what must first and foremost be remembered is that both the students and teacher are people, and should each have a voice in the learning process and, consequently, syllabus design.

From discussing what kinds of activities and tasks to do in class, whether or not they want activities to be filmed, be it for feedback, self-assessment or teacher assessment purposes, through the choice of topics to be covered, whether to do group work or work individually, to offering students a choice of alternative assessment methods, and asking them about **their** desired learning outcomes, at each level of the syllabus, students can be engaged in the decision making process, or rather reflective-practice cycle. Indeed, discussions, whether pre course, *in itinere* or post course, can constitute an occasion for genuine debate, in particular if the content teachers are also involved. Making sure the students' voice is not only heard but also heeded at all levels of the decision making process is essential if the reflective-practice quality approach is to work. The ASIGMA project (<http://lett.ubbcluj.ro:3636/>) is to be congratulated on making one of the four working groups for the students – at a national level their voice will be heard and heeded.

At the School of International Studies in Trento, this degree of debate and discussion with the students has evolved over several years. The main obstacle has been to win the trust of the content professors but also the students, who are still reluctant to speak out or even profess an opinion on the learning process. My students have even questioned my 'expertise', wondering whether I am a very good teacher if I need to ask them what we are going to do next lesson/over the semester or how they want to tackle some task<sup>12</sup>. Some have openly questioned whether they should be called upon to do so, as this question and response from a pilot questionnaire show:

Q: Do you think that teaching through a foreign language requires different pedagogical skills from teaching through the local language?

Comment: The question has to do with pedagogical skills that we students are not entitled to know and discuss about [sic]<sup>13</sup>

It is my contention that students do, indeed, need to reflect on these very same skills, and that they not only have a right to discuss them, but a duty<sup>14</sup>. In fact, involving students in the learning process implies not only rights, but also responsibilities. Indeed, I see the process of learning as that of helping students become independent learners, helping them recognise that they are the principle 'agents' in their own learning process (Van Lier 2007). Given the student perceptions as to their own role and the mismatch between student and teacher perceptions as to what constitutes appropriate teaching methodology (see e.g. Brown 2009), this change in perceptions is a fundamental part of the language training and learner development. Thus they need to become aware of and accept their

<sup>8</sup>But sadly I still see many of these perceptions alive in the halls of Italian academia still today.

<sup>9</sup>Perhaps not so democratic everywhere in the world, e.g. in Iran or China

<sup>10</sup>After Meighan and Meighan 1990

<sup>11</sup>My own suggestions, for which I ask Meighan and Meighan's forgiveness.

<sup>12</sup>One student expressed this feeling: "Isn't that what she is paid for, after all?" See Appendix is one comment .

<sup>13</sup>Questionnaires submitted as part of the Lanqua project – CLIL sub-group. <http://www.lanqua.eu/>

<sup>14</sup>It is my personal mission to convince both students and professors of this. We (in Italy) are still light years away from the enlightened system in Finland, for example, where university professors also do teacher training to help them understand the different student needs and indeed different teaching approaches needed on International Programmes and domestic programmes.

role in the process. In addition they also need to develop those skills, strategies and competences which enable them to become effective learners and thus take charge of their own learning (Holec 1981). This does not mean that they learn how to become merely information processing machines or sponges absorbing information and language along with it<sup>15</sup>, rather it is the interaction that takes place within the classroom that enables the learners to build on former knowledge and make the new knowledge encountered their own – if they so wish – and by interacting/engaging actively with teacher and fellow students and with texts, using a wide variety of discourse modes, to develop those very skills and competences which will enable them to become lifelong learners. As far as language learning is concerned, in particular with regard to International Masters programmes, if this interaction takes place in the content classroom with some focus on language or in the language classroom with some focus on content, then we are much closer to Pennycook's notion of 'voice'<sup>16</sup> (Pennycook 1997).

"The notion of voice [...] is not one that implies *any* language use, such as the often empty babble of the communicative language class, but rather must be tied to an understanding that to use language is not so much a question of mastering a system as it is a question of struggling to find means of articulation amid the cultures, discourses and ideologies within which we live our lives." (Penycook 1997, p. 44)

I would add that these discourses include the academic discourses of the university classroom, and the professional discourses of the chosen career path of the student.

This brings us back to the main focus of this paper, namely identifying the (immediate and future) needs of students in order to design a language syllabus which enhances the whole learning process (both content and language), helps achieve the desired learning outcomes (both language and content) i.e. helps develop both language skills and competences and the specific skills and competences relative to the discipline area. In other words, the skills and competence based syllabus must reflect the dual focus of the whole learning process.

Designing the syllabus around the needs of the learner, rather than a knowledge/product oriented syllabus, is by no means a new idea, over 30 years ago, Illich (1979), asserted that the most effective learning is to fulfil a personal need. The immediate language needs of students on International Masters (cfr note 1) are those related to academic study skills as outlined by Räsänen at a workshop at the first ASIGMA conference in Brasov (Räsänen 2012). At Trento, in the first year of the two-year MA in European and International Studies (MEIS), these needs are met by a General English course focusing on skills development and language awareness and two Language Support courses in the form of an EAP course (both semesters – 48 hours) which is content focused and student-centred<sup>17</sup> and specific ESP language support for the Law courses (autumn semester – 24 hours)<sup>18</sup>. The introduction of the latter was the direct result of feedback provided in TQA questionnaires and feedback sessions with students after the first year of the Master's in 2003-2004. Over the years it has developed from an ESP course with no direct cooperation with the Law Professors, to a content driven adjunct CLIL format<sup>19</sup>, i.e. the syllabus is negotiated with the Profs and the students at the beginning of each year, with adjustments made during the year, depending on whether the Law Profs hold a moot court or other simulation (depending on whether students **want** to do this). In short, student-centred practices from the language courses have 'spilled over' into the content courses. Evidence that in many contexts a bottom up approach is perhaps the best way forward. So much so that other content teachers, upon hearing the appreciative **voice of the**

<sup>15</sup>Cfr van Lier 2007 "The learner is a whole person, not an input-processing brain that happens to be located inside a body"

<sup>16</sup>"The notion of voice [...] is not one that implies *any* language use, such as the often empty babble of the communicative language class, but rather must be tied to an understanding that to use language is not so much a question of mastering a system as it is a question of struggling to find means of articulation amid the cultures, discourses and ideologies within which we live our lives."

<sup>17</sup>The MEIS is interdisciplinary, and each discipline has different academic practices and conventions which students have to be sensitive to.

<sup>18</sup>Despite these courses being non-compulsory and additional to the English Language Module, attendance is often higher than in the discipline courses, especially those disciplines where 'Book Exams' are still the norm.

<sup>19</sup>See page 6 of Lanqua CLIL sub-group Year 1 report: [http://www.lanqua.eu/sites/default/files/Year1Report\\_CLIL\\_ForUpload\\_WithoutAppendices\\_0.pdf](http://www.lanqua.eu/sites/default/files/Year1Report_CLIL_ForUpload_WithoutAppendices_0.pdf)

**students**, were keen for similar cooperation on their courses. This cooperation is in the form of close cooperation between the English Language lecturer and the History and the Politics lecturers, further collaboration will take place with the Economics lecturer from the coming academic year. In short, positive feedback from students has meant Professors have become sensitive to alternative ways of teaching, including letting non-specialists (the language teachers) into their classrooms and the sanctity of their discipline area. It has not been an easy ride; a roller-coaster<sup>20</sup> is perhaps the best metaphor, and it is obviously a work in progress. However, despite the context and the obstacles, considerable progress has been made.

Moreover, and more importantly for the language teachers and students alike, greater recognition has been given to languages as a whole, both in terms of academic recognition, and more importantly for the students, in terms of credits. Thanks to student pressure on the degree board, both via the student representatives and feedback from all students, English Language has increased from an initial 6 credits with subsidiary status in 2003/4 to a whopping 16 credits over the two years 10 + 6) from 2012/13 and was upgraded in 2007/8 to core subject. Proof that **students can make a difference** at all levels of the process.<sup>21</sup>

Moving now to meeting students' future needs, once they have left the halls of academia and engage in professional activities, whether paid or unpaid, given the general tendency to make graduates serve a series of internships before being gainfully employed. Once more using the MEIS as an illustrative example, while some students still need EAP, and can attend the courses organised for first year students, the focus of English language in the second year is 'professional' English. Here also the syllabus has developed over the years thanks almost wholly to the feedback and input from students returning from internships or former students doing internships or in employment. The syllabus consists in a series of complex tasks, all of which have been performed by (ex)MEIS students in the 'real world'. The materials are all authentic, the situations as authentic as possible, the content authentic, the outcomes based on authentic outcomes: in short, the whole course is based on preparing for and performing in simulations, simulations which are as authentic as possible. To do this the students need not only to develop specific discipline related language skills, such as the language of negotiation, but also refine the metalinguistic and language awareness skills developed in the Language Module<sup>22</sup> in the first year, to enable them to produce the documents in the appropriate style and register and using the appropriate technical terminology. For example even advanced students are often unaware of the various degrees of register needed when operating professionally, something often taken for granted.

In the last academic year students organised a "political debate" on the Roma question (with 'guests' from the French and Italian governments, human rights groups and a Roma person) involving research, presentation and arguing skills, held a simulated meeting of country representatives over the Arctic Question, held an EU meeting of Foreign Ministers to discuss Turkey's accession to the EU and organised a United Nations Panel Meeting to draw up proposals for Security Council Reform. In all cases students have to produce a series of documents, ranging from invitations to speak, conference programmes, press releases, reports, emails regarding accommodation and transport arrangements etc. all taking as models authentic materials provided by MEIS interns. Over the last few years I have built up a huge store of materials, but each year students come back with more examples, each wanting to contribute to the next edition of the 'Advanced English Workshop'. They are also eager to share their experiences with me, even if no longer my students. Without their contribution, the course would simply not exist, and I am grateful for their continued cooperation. I still receive materials and messages from students from the very first edition of the MEIS in 2004, some of whom have worked their way up the career ladder in international organisations. This means we also get materials and input of a higher, more challenging kind. But this is even more stimulating

<sup>20</sup>When new content professors and lecturers take over a course, the whole process has to start again.

<sup>21</sup>For more information see the case study "Promoting Collaboration between Content Teachers and Language Teachers for the Master's in European and International Studies" at <http://www.lanqua.eu/theme/content-language-integrated-learning-clil>

<sup>22</sup>Including genre analysis and noticing skills, but in particular awareness of such things as collocation and colligation in specialised texts.

for the students, who aspire to follow in the footsteps of their former colleagues. One could not wish for better motivation, the key to successful language learning, albeit instrumental motivation.<sup>23</sup>

It is perhaps interesting to note that although I use an anonymous online questionnaire,<sup>24</sup> which I send to students during the summer after completing the course so they will feel completely free to answer whatever they like, many students prefer to come to see me in person when they get back from the internship, or they prefer to write me an email (obviously no longer anonymous) with their thoughts about the English course, the degree course, and many other things. From being sceptical and even resistant to take charge of their own (language) learning in the first year, by the time they go out into the real world, they really appreciate being listened to and are happy to make a contribution, even if they will no longer profit from it.

This approach to syllabus design takes a considerable amount of effort on the teacher's part, as selecting and collating the model materials is time consuming. However, it is well worth the effort. Student motivation is high, and while they sometimes complain (still) that the amount of time they spend is disproportionate to the credits they get in the second year (just 6 for a year long course whereas other courses are 6 per semester) they often write to me when out in the real world, to say it is worth it in the end.

### **3. Is this model transferrable?**

To return to the problem at the beginning of this paper – namely of improving attendance and pass rates on non-specialist language courses across the university. Projects are currently underway in the Law, Sociology and Engineering Faculty. Let us look at each of these in turn.

In the first case, ESP courses had been run for years by an experienced EFL teacher with no background in law, based on an outdated international law text book. Both attendance and outcomes were well below expectations. A recently appointed Law Professor thought it might be interesting to introduce the Cambridge ILEC exams to stimulate attendance. These, while valid in the appropriate context, are based mainly on British Law – of little relevance in the Trento context. It was therefore decided, three years ago, to change the format of the ESP courses, organising them on similar lines to the first year at the MEIS, where topics suggested by the students taking the form of student-led seminars form the basis of the lessons, though some units of a course book are used. Last year the faculty asked the language centre to double the number of courses offered and there is still a waiting list for free places. The success of these courses is due in large part to close collaboration between the language teacher and Law professors and not least the involvement of the students in selecting the topics which form the content basis of the language lessons. It should perhaps be noted that few courses, bar those with visiting professors, on the Law degrees are offered in English.

In Sociology there has been an increased demand for ESP and EAP courses at the Bachelor's level which are now geared to preparing students for entry to the MEIS (which is highly selective) and other MA level courses offered in English. According to feedback from the students, this increase in interest (and attendance) in language courses is a 'trickle down' effect from the International Master's that they hope to attend after graduating.

At engineering, perhaps the greatest challenge at Trento, the ESP project has taken longer to get off the ground, despite a great deal of interest and cooperation from the Faculty. With 5 different Masters with very different needs offering one English for Engineers course to satisfy all 5 disciplines is more or less an impossibility. However, with the introduction of the Cambridge English 360 platform this year (2011/12), which has an English for Engineering Course as one of its resources and at the same time enables course creation (the platform is similar to but more flexible than Moodle) we have been able to create a course with differentiated online activities. We are also

<sup>23</sup>The role of motivation, of whatever type, is the greatest enhancer to learning and motivational teaching practice underpins my whole teaching ethos. See Dörnyei (2001) and Dörnyei and Ushioda (2010)

<sup>24</sup>I use the free surveymonkey platform at <http://www.surveymonkey.com/>



in the process of developing specific online English for Engineering language tests<sup>25</sup>, with texts from the appropriate subject area and multiple writing options so the student has a choice of which questions to answer, and individualised oral exams where the student can choose which topics to talk about. Materials, syllabus design and tasks for both the course and the exams is the result of online questionnaires sent to alumni regarding language skills used/needed and text types encountered/produced in the normal course of their work and discussions with course professors.<sup>26</sup> It is hoped, in the future, the creation of similar feedback and materials from former students will ensure that also at engineering the reflective quality cycle will be adopted. It remains to be seen whether this switch to ESP from general English will achieve the desired effects from an institutional point of view (higher pass rates). But I firmly believe that trying to match learning outcomes with student's needs will increase motivation and as a consequence attendance and subsequently pass rates. Indeed, motivation will increase on two counts, firstly students will begin to see the relevance of the course to their future profession (whether or not they realise they will be given Life-Long learning skills) and if pass rates increase, there will be further motivation to attend the course. If the new ESP course can engage students in this virtuous cycle, they too, will be more inclined to make a contribution to the improvement of the course for future generations.

#### 4. In conclusion

The evolution of the English Language course and English Language support at the School of International Studies has provided a model on which to base other forms of language provision across the university. The form this provision takes depends very much on the context, the cooperation of the faculty, and the determination of the language teachers involved. The underlying principle of these language courses is that the students' real needs, as voiced by them, be met. As far as is possible, learning outcomes should be set and the syllabus should be designed based on input from both students and professors and they should reflect both the immediate needs of the students and their future needs.

The experience at the MEIS has shown that by encouraging students to speak out and listening to what they have to say results in a more highly motivated, interactive and successful learning process, making all the extra effort needed to introduce such an approach in a sometimes hostile context all the more worthwhile.

We owe it to our students to provide them with the opportunity to develop their own skills and strategies so that they can have the confidence to act assertively in the real world. But we must not forget that students should also be given their own 'voice'. And more importantly, we should listen to what they have to say – they have an important part to play in the quality model cycle.

#### 5. Appendix

Below is a selection of student comments which illustrate both student perceptions of the approach described above and how they reacted to it. As these are the students' own words, I have not adapted/corrected any of their utterances, even if they may appear unorthodox or non-academic. These are their words, which I wish to share with you, with, of course the students' full consent.

- First of all thank you for asking our opinion On the Student's vs Teacher's role in the learning process Leaving up the choice to students is a clever alternative I am really pro

<sup>25</sup>Students have to pass the Listening, Reading and Writing parts online before being admitted to the oral discussion. Numbers at engineering are so high that tailored assessment methods, such as those at the MEIS, are unfeasible.

<sup>26</sup>An initial request to Engineering Professors for sample materials resulted in us being sent a series of bibliographies – mainly academic texts. Missing the point entirely. Students have resulted in being far more reliable 'informants' in this regard.

student led seminars, also for the fact that we have chosen current and stimulating topics (if we are interested in them it's easier to involve people in debating them). Teacher chosen topics and student chosen topics are both very important. Students should be able to manage both. I really appreciated that you let us choose the topics. But it is doubtful that all students can manage "this kind of freedom"

## 6. On more formal aspects of language learning

- During and after the presentation the teacher (you) should intervene more and correct pronunciation/grammar. The intervention of the teacher is fundamental, as being corrected while you are speaking gives you the exact perception of your mistake.<sup>27</sup>
- I think you were able to ..let's say "drill deeply enough" to fix important concepts into students' minds (listening of conferences, long difficult exercises, challenging, but really effective in putting people at work with English, and therefore successful).

**When I went to do my stage (internship) at the OECD I was really thankful for the tasks as they helped me understand how I could approach things in the office without keep asking the others what I must do. In particular identifying key points and summary writing was useful. And email writing. I really found challenging the listening of long conferences (and I hated you quite a lot while doing it), but I think it's really proving something. If you don't do, and don't learn, you won't improve. And what you do is to put a student in the situation of realizing it, and doing it, with a good master showing what's right and what's wrong. So that a student can really progress. On the cooperation with content teachers**

Integration<sup>28</sup> The right way to go is the one of the last years: specific subjects and simulations in accordance with other courses (e.g. the last one with professor S.<sup>29</sup>). In particular, I would suggest at least one simulation per semester. Maybe something more intimate and easygoing just for the first semester of the first year, without law professors around. In general, the more integration the better.

## 7. One last comment on being asked for involvement in the learning process

*Thank you for asking and listening to our feedback. I wish all the professors would do the same!*

<sup>27</sup>These are very commonly held beliefs, expressed every year, in particular by first year students. See Brown 2009 for a detailed study on student vs teacher perceptions of the place for correction

<sup>28</sup>By this the student means integration between the language learning programme and the content courses. While having no knowledge of language learning methodology, he used the very terms used in the CLIL label - **Content Language Integrated Learning**. Yet again proof that we should listen to our students as to what they feel works well.

<sup>29</sup>European Politics Lecturer.

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