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Cooperation and development for academic language skills in the university context

Abstract

This paper analyses the learning process of students of a Master's course in Cooperation and Development (C&D) who attend classes in English for Academic Writing at the University of Calabria, and their awareness of competences achieved. The language objectives are to expand students' knowledge of the main elements of spoken and written discourse in English in academic contexts (Jordan 1997; Harding 2007) with focus on specialized language in the fields of C&D.

The study evaluates the ability of students to improve their competences and assess their language development using the self-assessment grid of academic language competences included in the European Language Portfolio created at the University of Calabria (2003) and validated by the European Commission. Specifically, this version of the ELP focuses on academic language and contains descriptors aimed at evaluating learners' language competences in academic contexts (Council of Europe, Validation Committee 040/2003). A group of 25 students participated, in the second semester of the academic year 2018. Students' oral production, interaction and academic writing skills were monitored. For the written examination students were required to write a Research Proposal (RP) showing competence in text cohesion and content coherence, appropriate use of terminology and accurate use of language structures. Following on from the acceptance of the RP, students delivered an oral presentation on the topic presented, showing ability in answering questions and expressing opinions on issues presented by other students. The concepts of autonomous learning (Holec 1979, Holec 1981; Little 1991) are crucial in order to monitor students' improvement and commitment. A contrastive analysis of data from students' first self-assessment to the final evaluation of competences achieved by the end of the academic year was conducted.

Key words: students' learning process, self-assessment, European Language Portfolio, critical thinking, learner reflection, English for Specific Purposes, English for Academic Purposes

¹ Although the authors cooperated fully in researching and writing this paper, they individually devoted more time to the following sections and the related subsections: Carmen Argondizzo 1, 2, 5; Vanessa Marcella 3; Maria I. Sasso 4.

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1 Introduction

This paper focuses on specific key concepts related to teaching experiences carried out at the University of Calabria. It particularly highlights: a) the importance of raising learners' and teachers' awareness and understanding of the language descriptors outlined in the Common European Framework of Reference (Council of Europe, henceforth CEFR, 2001); b) the benefits of students' autonomous learning and capacity for self-assessment in language development; c) the importance of cooperation among students both in the didactic and social approaches used.

Over the years, the CEFR has gradually created a common basis for the description of language objectives, content and pedagogical approaches which can be easily shared by the majority of European educational contexts. Although it was not easy to adapt to the new system, language professionals benefitted from the CEFR in order to carry out language assessment in a more accurate way thanks to the descriptors, which functioned as guidelines for them. The Council of Europe's main aim was to create a framework that would give language experts across the EU a common register through which to discuss curricula, teaching and learning issues, and assessment. Since then, studies, articles and books have been published to support the spread (Little 2000; Morrow 2004) and the development of new practices in language classrooms (Little 1999; Benson 2001; Gardner 2007). A significant contribution was provided by the CercleS version (2002) of the European Language Portfolio (ELP), which offered a learning tool that gave a central role to learners' self-assessment. It was not easy, though, to change the mental habits of language professionals or students who had for long referred to national assessment procedures. Professionals and learners had to face a sort of re-education which gave them the chance to internalize the new European assessment system, while paving the way for a growing awareness of the new dynamics of a system whose utility has come to be recognised by a large academic community. The advantages of such a new system were gradually acknowledged thanks to the internationalization process which was developing in

many European universities. The CEFR language levels and the corresponding descriptors became central to the evaluation of language learning and teaching. As with any evaluation system, strengths and weaknesses have been apparent from the beginning. However, adjustments, adaptation of the system to national or home university needs and, above all, common sense in using the CEFR have made this form of evaluation a reference point which continues to be valuable (Council of Europe 2018). It is advisable, therefore, that language learners become familiar with the CEFR content from the earliest days of their studies. Language instructors can obviously play a role in this direction.

The CEFR draws on the concept of autonomous language learning (Holec 1981, Holec 1988, Holec 1996; Little 1991, Little 1999, Little 2000; Benson 2001), which gives priority to the concept of practising the language while following an individualised learning path which focuses on the real language needs and cultural interests of the learner. It is an encouragement towards the natural growth of awareness of “who I really am” and “what I really want to get from my learning action”. It implies the capacity to build study strategies enabling each learner to master a given language throughout life, based on the conviction that learning a language is a lifelong experience. Learners will therefore greatly benefit from a teaching approach which will support them in acquiring autonomous learning tools. Students’ self-assessment of their language learning process through time and competences achieved at a given point in time is related to both the CEFR and autonomous language learning. If students are familiar with assessment procedures (i.e., the CEFR content and how to use it) and if they are aware of the personal needs and study strategies which they can adopt while studying autonomously, self-assessment can easily become natural class practice which can allow them to understand both their learning attainments and the competences they still need to master. Learners will obviously need the instructor’s support.

Cooperative learning (Loveday 1982; Gumperz 1982; Hornberger and McKay 2010) is a teaching and learning approach where students are active agents in their learning process. This approach is likely to increase students’ academic learning as well as personal growth because it reduces learning anxiety, encourages students’ participation and talk in the target language, and builds a supportive learning environment. Thanks to their active participation, students can better shape their learning path maximizing their own as well as others’ learning. In this type of context, the abilities of helping others, cooperating with others, and taking individual responsibility in order to achieve a common goal relate to life skills such as listening, empathy, negotiation, leadership, constructive argument, skill transfer, and knowledge of others. We wanted therefore to encourage our students to cooperate in class since we believe that learning

is a shared experience which combines the learners' willingness to communicate with others and exchange intercultural actions.

The following section will describe learning activities carried out with a group of Cooperation and Development students who were offered the opportunity to experience teaching actions which integrated the three pedagogical concepts briefly discussed above.

2 The university context

2.1 The participants

This study involved a group of 25 students belonging to the Master's Degree Course in Cooperation and Development (Department of Political Science), in the second semester of the academic year 2017–2018. They were observed and monitored during the three-month course *English for Academic Writing in Cooperation and Development*, comprising dynamic lessons which included constant collaborative group work and the frequent use of videos aimed at developing listening skills which would encourage critical thinking in relation to the topics presented through the video clips. Moreover, course objectives included a) writing skills with specific focus on academic writing and the development of a Research Proposal; b) speaking skills (i.e. oral production and interaction) with specific focus on delivering a well-developed oral presentation. Through the presentation, they were asked to highlight significant points, explain the main points with reasonable precision, provide details, evaluate situations, express opinions specifically related to their field of study, while using appropriate vocabulary.

The students reacted with enthusiasm to the didactic approach and teaching techniques, which they considered appropriate to the academic needs of their university career. Moreover, they contributed to the selection of topics to be discussed in class with the support of videos.

2.2 Objectives of the study

Based on the premises outlined in the introduction, the study aimed at analysing these target students' learning processes while they were expanding their knowledge of specialised language in a specific academic field. At the same time, it aimed to evaluate the students' ability to improve their self-assessment competences in relation to their language development. In order to obtain both subjective and objective data, an analysis was carried out comparing students' self-assessment, elicited at the beginning and at the end of the course, with the instructor's evaluation. The latter was based on students' exam performance and thus on the competences they had objectively achieved. Specifically, we wanted to find answers to the following questions: a) what goals students want to reach in terms of competences in general and academic English language; b) how they self-assess their competences at mid-term and at

the end of the course; c) how their self-assessment correlates with the level achieved at the final exam.

2.3 Strategies and teaching resources

As highlighted in the previous section, the language objectives were to expand students' knowledge of the main elements of spoken and written discourse in English in the academic context with a particular focus on specialized language in their field of study. It was therefore crucial to understand students' needs and trigger their motivation and enthusiasm. Therefore, the European Language Portfolio (ELP), video recordings, students' critical thinking and feedback on language activities were the resources provided and strategies used during the course. Each of them contributed to the development of self-awareness in their learning path. In particular, the ELP was the tool they used as a benchmark; video recordings helped them to gain self-confidence and monitor their learning process; critical thinking and feedback on language progress enabled them to focus on their learning process and overall experience. As a consequence, although in the short run the students' objective was to achieve the final goal of passing the exam (i.e., instrumental motivation), they had the opportunity to acquire specific tools and competences which could be useful in the long run for the pursuit of lifelong learning. The following section will focus on the didactic tools used.

3 The ELP and the self-assessment grid

The use of the ELP was particularly important in order to focus on relevant concepts² such as:

- Levels of competence, defined by CEFR in macro and micro terms, respectively in the Global Scale and Self-assessment Grid (Council of Europe 2001: 24, 26–27) and in the illustrative scales in Chapters 4 and 5;
- Varieties of competence according to language activities, which make learners aware that their progress depends on what exposure they have to the target language;
- Autonomous learning, based on students' individual needs and pace.
- Self-assessment, which shows learners' ability to identify and evaluate their competences;
- Critical thinking, which enhances learners' ability to think and make decisions individually.

In particular, students and teachers involved in this study needed more precise descriptors in order to identify the appropriate objectives for both general and academic competences as related to the individual interests in the different language skills and professional experiences they were expecting to have. Therefore, it was decided to adopt the ELP created at the

² See also Council of Europe. 2011. European Language Portfolio (ELP): *Principles and guidelines with added explanatory notes*. Strasbourg: Council of Europe.

University of Calabria. This ELP, developed by a team of researchers particularly interested in Language for Special and Academic purposes (Jordan 1997; Harding 2007), focuses on a set of descriptors of academic language competences which encourage university students to develop awareness of their academic goals. The document offers didactic tools related to language and academic interests that university students develop and explore during their academic studies (Argondizzo and Sasso 2016).

		A 2	B 1	B 2	C 1
S P E A K I N G	Oral Production	I can describe my academic or working experience using simple expressions.	I can describe the topic of the lesson using simple and coherent sentences. I can express opinions regarding the topic of the lesson.	I can summarise oral or written texts and I can express my opinions on the topic appropriately. I can explain opinions on the topic I studied, stating the advantages or disadvantages and identify different points of views. I can give simple but accurate presentations on a familiar topic.	I can give clear and detailed presentations on complex subjects. I can deal with complex topics, integrate sub-themes, develop particular points and conclude in an appropriate way (e.g.: group-work or seminars).
W R I T I N G	Written Production	I can take simple notes during the lesson. I can write a short and simple message (e.g.: memo, fax, e-mail).	I can take notes of the most relevant information of an oral or written communication. I can write a simple text according to a given model (e.g.: CV).	I can write paragraphs using given models and adding personal information. I can expand information in forms of graphs and mind maps for oral presentations.	I can write texts classifying and systematising information and opinions in order to underline the most relevant points (e.g.: short reports on course subjects, cover letters, abstracts, etc.).

Figure 1: An excerpt from [authors' university] ELP Self-assessment grid of academic language competences

Figure 1 shows a grid of descriptors from the University of Calabria ELP that focus on oral and written production in academic language. The descriptors in the ELP grid give students the opportunity to identify their level for each skill. For instance, if we consider the B2 level with reference to oral production, students were encouraged to improve their competences in summarising oral or written texts and expressing their opinions on a topic appropriately. In class, they were asked to give opinions on the topics presented, stating advantages or disadvantages as well as giving simple but accurate presentations on a familiar topic. The major course objectives in written production were writing paragraphs using given models and adding personal information, providing information in forms of graphs and mind maps for oral presentations, and focusing on the development of their Research Proposal.

Moreover, in order to foster their critical thinking while developing writing skills, students were asked to write reports on how they used the ELP and what benefits they received while using it. Their reports highlighted that students considered the ELP as a tool that helped them to become aware of their language competences, set realistic goals and constantly monitor

their learning process. Many of them expressed discouragement in realising how much they still had to improve in order to fulfil their needs.

3.1 Video recordings

Video recordings were fundamental for both teaching and learning. Watching videos about students' fields of interest, cooperation and economic development in this case, allowed them to improve their listening strategies and their ability to reflect on the content of video presentations, seminars, talks and authentic materials. In addition, this led them to broaden their vocabulary, focus on pronunciation and different types of accent in the English language, seize cultural aspects and values in different contexts. During these lessons, students demonstrated their ability to ask and answer questions about key details, express thoughts, follow rules for discussions, understand and use questions.

However, watching videos did not serve only cultural purposes. Video recordings were also used in order to have a record of their class performances. As a class activity, students could observe themselves and critically analyse their performance in order to explore the language used, identify the possible mistakes made regarding the lexicon used, the pronunciation and the style (e.g., body language, contacts with the interlocutors). This was an excellent way to help them to gain self-confidence, monitor their learning process and become independent learners.

3.2 Critical thinking and students' perceptions

Critical thinking refers to individuals' ability to think and make good decisions independently. According to Elder and Paul (1994), critical thinking is the ability of individuals to take charge of their own thinking and develop appropriate criteria and standards for analysing their own thinking. As Brown (2004) states, we believe that the objectives of a curriculum should not be strictly limited to linguistic factors alone, but should also include the art of critical thinking.

Based on these premises, students were strongly encouraged to think critically about their language experiences, identify and analyse their language needs in order to identify appropriate learning methods, and monitor their learning process while reflecting on the topics of their fields of study. This helped them to understand how meaningful language learning can be for them. In small groups, they were encouraged to improve their oral and writing competences through discussions and presentations and the use of authentic material, such as videos, which activated the students' interests. After watching the videos, students analyzed the topic presented, engaged in discussions, shared opinions, and suggested solutions. These practices enhanced their active participation. Moreover, listening to authentic material provided them with key words and advanced language structures they could then internalize and express in

both oral and written form. As regards their written production, students were encouraged to share their research proposal drafts, respecting their pace and readiness. This mutual exchange helped them to develop their understanding of concepts and reflect on accurate lexical and syntactic structures. This process contributed to a friendly non-competitive atmosphere and created more proficient learners. Indeed, for the purposes of this study, it was crucial to ask students to provide feedback about their learning experience. Feedback occurred frequently from the beginning of the course. The goal was to provide students with information about how well they performed and also how they could have improved. The combination of their personal feedback and the feedback provided by the teacher or by other students encouraged cooperative learning and helped them to develop both a deeper understanding of academic topics presented in class as well as a better identification of their language needs and improvements. However, the most important feedback was from students' perspective, i.e., their reflection on their own progress, and classmates' reflections on one another's performance which led to co-operative learning.

4 Data collection and analysis

At the beginning of the course students were provided with the ELP self-assessment grid. Some descriptors were erased from the grid and listed on another page in random order. Students were asked to read carefully the descriptors through all the levels and complete the grid with the missing ones. This task had the objective of familiarising them with the content and terminology of descriptors and raising their awareness of the matching between levels and descriptors. Then, they were asked to use the grid they had filled in and assess themselves for both General and Academic skills. The majority of students (71% with reference to General skills and 62% with reference to Academic skills) evaluated themselves within A2 and B1 levels.

This activity served as an introduction that led to the three main steps this study was based on:

- Step 1: Goal setting,
- Step 2: Mid-term assessment,
- Step 3: Final assessment.

During these steps, students were the main protagonists, as highlighted below.

4.1 Step 1: goal setting

Students were asked to define a personal goal to be achieved by the end of the course in terms of language competences. This task helped them to increase their self-awareness and, therefore, analyse in depth their needs in order to reach their objectives. Most importantly, it greatly increased their motivation.

The results of the first step are reported in Figures 2 and 3.

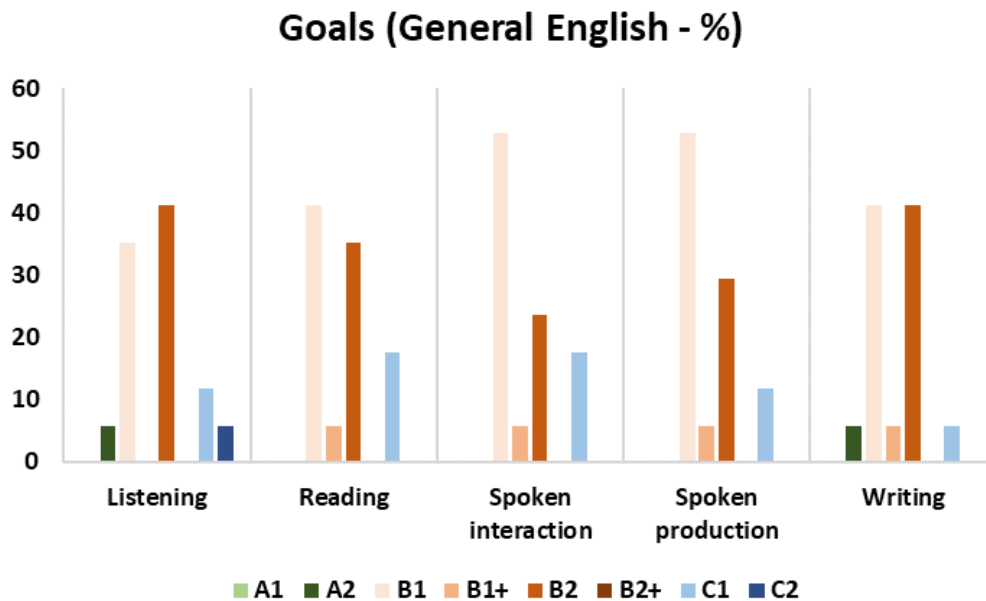


Figure 2 Results of the goal-setting step – General English

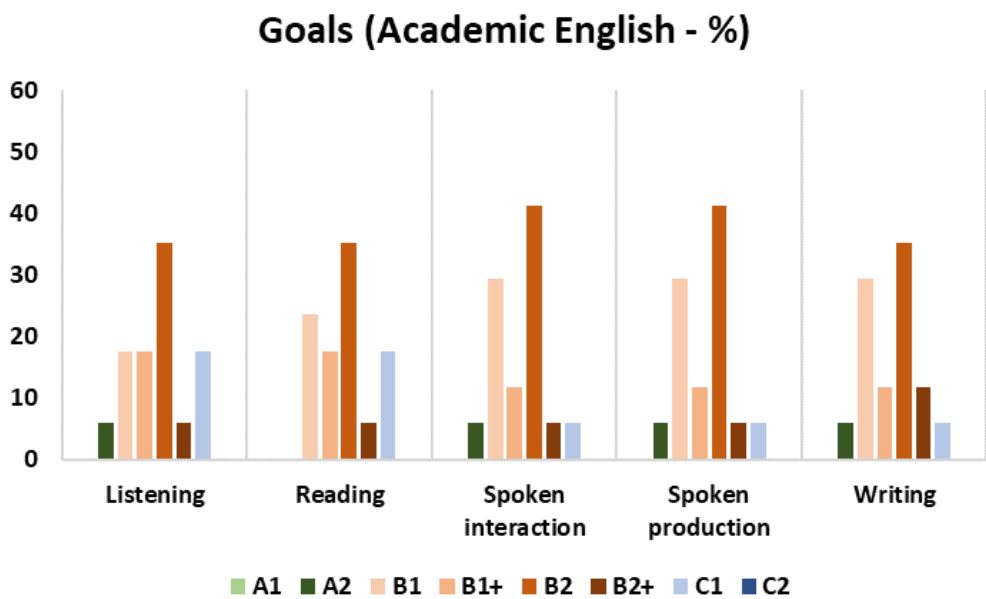


Figure 3 Results of the goal-setting step – Academic English

As Figure 2 shows, with reference to General skills, 84% of students defined the B1 level in Reading, Speaking (production and interaction) and Writing as their personal goal of achievement. For Listening, 41% identified B2 as the level of competence they would like to

achieve. Just 2% of students chose A1 or A2 levels, whereas the remaining 14 percent indicated C1 or C2. Such a high goal for Listening shows on the one hand an initial lack of awareness of how difficult it is to master listening skills, but also highlights, on the other hand, the importance that they assign to a skill which is fundamental for effective communication.

With regard to Academic skills (Figure 3), most students identified the B2 level as their objective, 5% aimed at the A levels, while 11% indicated the C levels. These data indicate that a great number of students set high targets for themselves at the beginning of the course.

4.2 Step 2: mid-term self-assessment

The second step was carried out at midterm. The objective of this task was to monitor and analyse students’ learning process, to identify possible problems and provide additional support.

Mid-term self-assessment is reported in Figures 4 and 5.

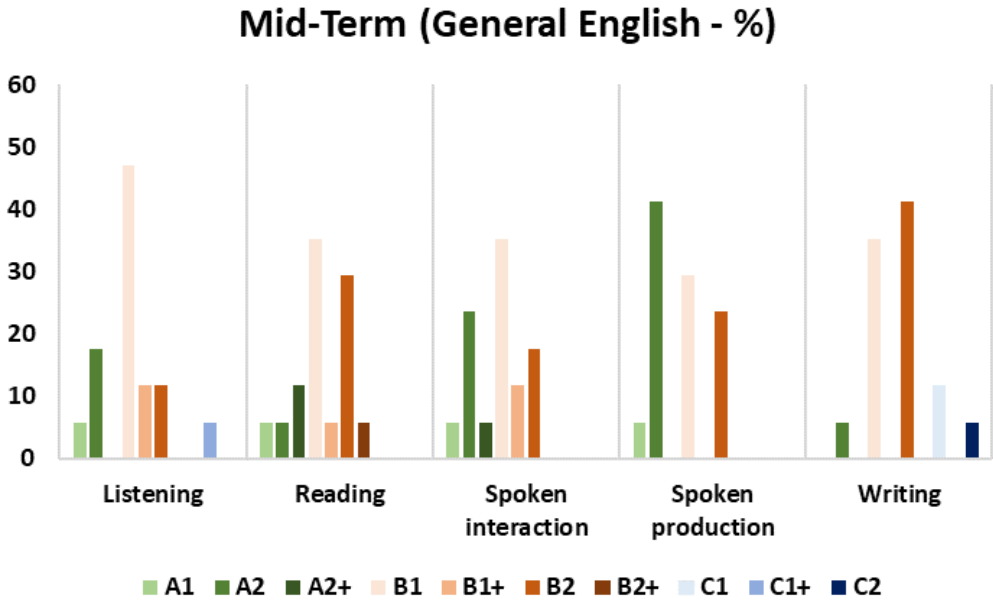


Figure 4 Results of the mid-term self-assessment phase – General English

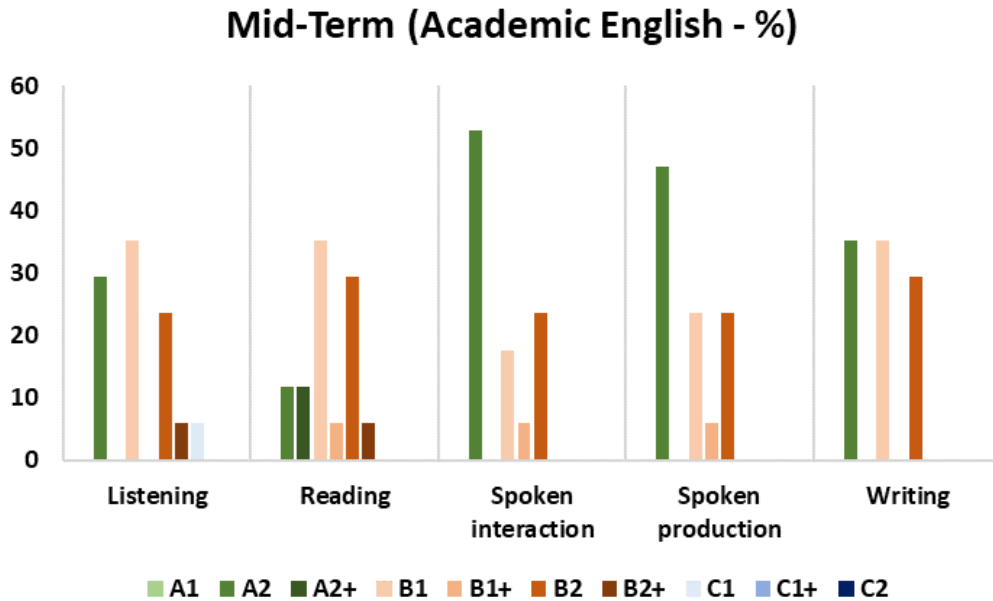


Figure 5 Results of the mid-term self-assessment phase – Academic English

Figures 4 and 5 show that the majority of students evaluated themselves at the B1 level for General skills and A2 level for Academic skills. This indicated that students felt less confident compared to the first data collection, especially in relation to the academic competences. However, these results outlined a more realistic picture of students’ competences and showed that their awareness was gradually developing.

4.3 Step 3: End-of-term self-assessment

The third step was based on students’ end-of-term self-assessment which was correlated to the actual level of competences they were given at the exam. Both General and Academic competences were assessed in the Summer session.

The results of the final self-assessment are reported in Figures 6 and 7.

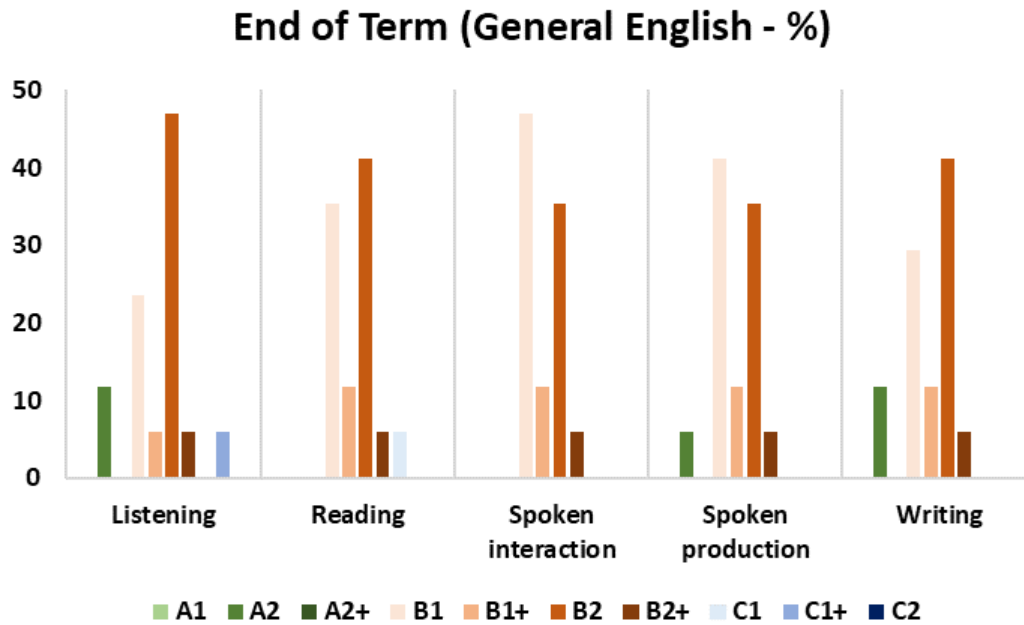


Figure 6 Results of the final self-assessment phase – General English

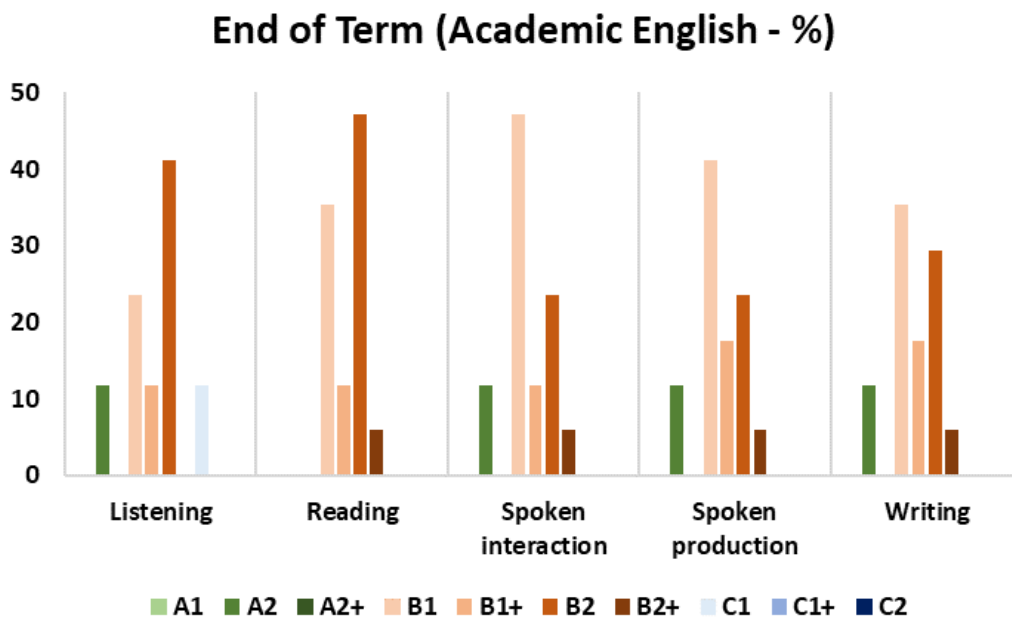


Figure 7 Results of the final self-assessment phase – Academic English

Figure 6 shows that most students indicated the B range as the level of competence they believed they had achieved in all skills. In addition, if we observe the difference in self-assessed levels between General and Academic language, we can see that it decreased noticeably when

compared to the mid-term assessment. We believe this was due to an increased self-awareness and self-confidence with the self-assessment parameters.

Figures 8 and 9 illustrate the correspondence between the final self-assessment and the levels achieved at the exams. We wanted to understand if students were able to use the ELP accurately and with full awareness.

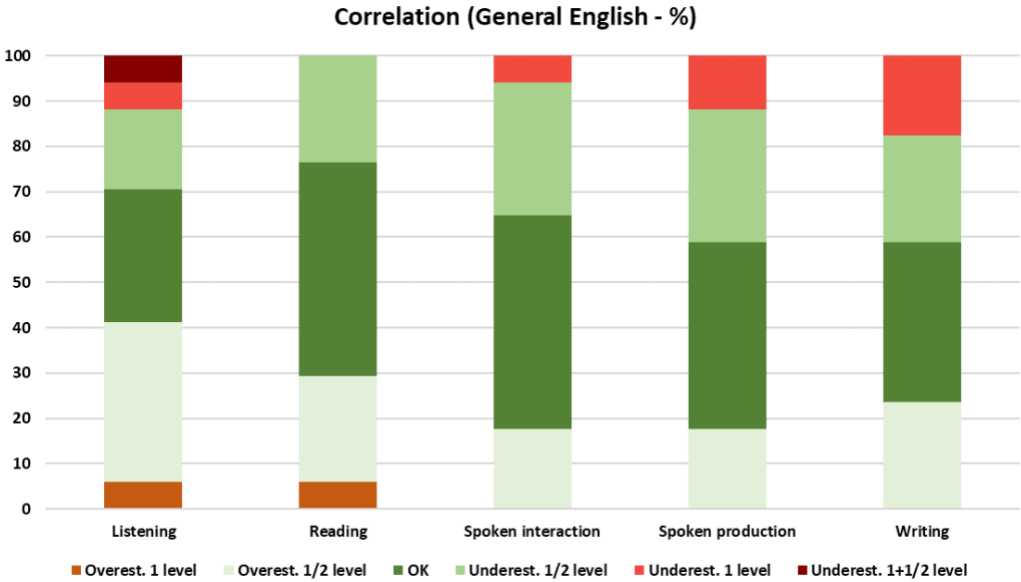


Figure 8 Correspondence between final self-assessed levels and levels achieved at the exams – General English

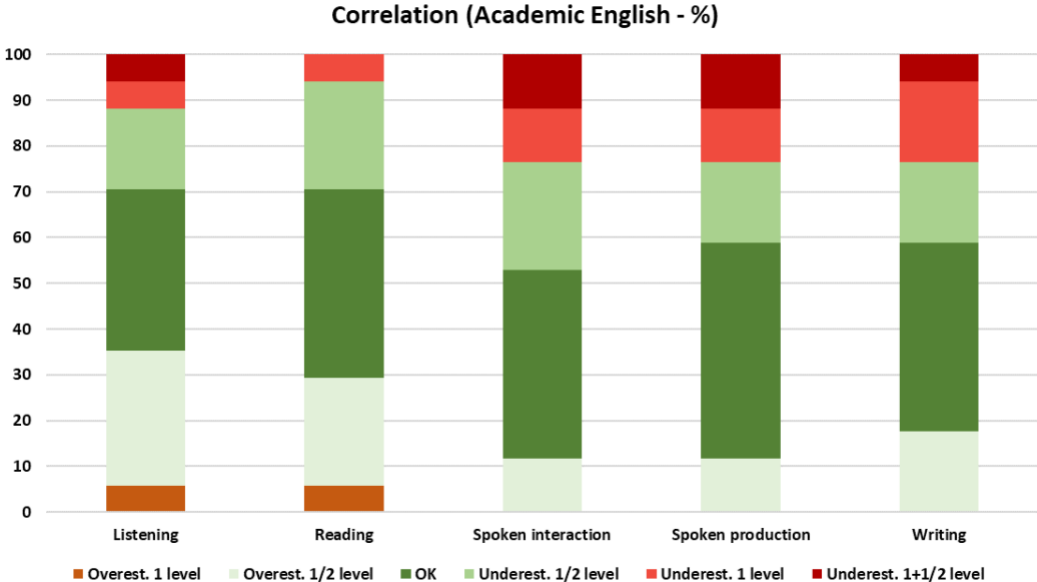


Figure 9 Correspondence between final self-assessed levels and levels achieved at the exams – Academic English

With reference to General English competences, it is remarkable that 88% of students, represented with the three shades of green, were able to evaluate themselves correctly (i.e.

within a half level higher or lower than the level achieved at the exam). In particular, there was a perfect match for 44% of students. Therefore, only 12% of students assessed themselves incorrectly (i.e. at least a level higher or lower than the one achieved at the exam). For Academic English competences, 80% of students assessed themselves almost correctly. Among these, 41% obtained the same level they had self-assessed, while 20% of students failed to identify their level appropriately. This last result shows that, despite the intensive input that they had throughout the course, a small number of students were not able to carry out appropriate self-evaluation. This may be due to their lack of confidence or to superficial motivation towards learning a language.

4.4 Moving ahead

The overall satisfaction that the students showed about the course experience at the end of the semester reassured us about the objectives that we wanted to reach: a majority of students who would gradually become more aware of their language learning process. We believe nonetheless that a reconsideration of some tools that we offered them during the course would be beneficial. In particular, we thought that it was appropriate to update the descriptors of the Academic English competences of the ELP grid used, based on the suggestions provided by the new CEFR Companion Volume. Particular attention should be paid to the new descriptors for mediation and for building on plurilingual and pluricultural repertoires. As the CEFR states, “the plurilingual approach emphasises the fact that as an individual person’s experience of language in its cultural contexts expands, from the language of the home to that of society at large and then to the languages of other peoples (whether learnt at school or college, or by direct experience), he or she does not keep these languages and cultures in strictly separated mental compartments, but rather builds up a communicative competence to which all knowledge and experience of language contributes and in which languages interrelate and interact” (Council of Europe 2018 Section 1.3, 3–4). Learners should indeed be enabled to enhance all of their linguistic and cultural resources in order to fully participate in social and educational contexts. As language professionals, this is what we constantly need to pursue for the benefit of our students.

5 Conclusion

This paper has described a university class experience based on a teaching approach which gives a fundamental role to students’ learning process and has involved them in activities aimed at both raising their awareness of the variables existing in the CEFR competence levels as well as encouraging self-assessment, autonomous learning and cooperation in class. The paper reported activities which, through the use of an academic-oriented European Language

Portfolio and video recordings of their performance, encouraged students' critical thinking about topics discussed in class and feedback on language development (during the course) and achievements (at the end of the course). Close observation of students' behaviour was carried out and data were collected with the aim of investigating their reaction to the use of the CEFR and the ELP. Students' initial uncertainties gradually paved the way to a more mature ability in autonomous learning and self-assessment. This confirmed that facilitating learners' awareness of what is happening in and outside class is one of the most profound teaching and learning components in any language teaching approach and at any level of education, from primary to tertiary. The study involved a small number of students but daily evidence which arises from the experience with the many students we meet in each new academic year, and the wide literature in this field referred to as the theoretical background to this study, confirm our belief.

It will be interesting in a future study to carry out a survey focusing on instructors' activities related to the following four concepts: learners' awareness of their learning; autonomous learning; self-assessment, and class cooperation. This will have the objective of investigating and giving an answer to other important and closely related aspects of teaching and learning: a) are the instructors *fully aware* of the importance of their learners' awareness as related to language learning? b) based on this concept, what activities do they carry out in order to create an active teaching process which will generously generate learners' conscious and intelligent linguistic and cultural growth? We hope to provide some tentative answers in a future study.

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Bio-notes

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