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Implementing translanguaging pedagogies in an English medium instruction course

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ABSTRACT

English medium education at university level is widely used in different contexts and it poses a challenge for students who are not used to studying through the medium of English. This study was carried out in a university in the Basque Country in Spain and it focuses on a course where students who are mostly Basque–Spanish bilinguals are taught through the medium of English. The course teacher applies a flexible language policy allowing for the use of three languages in the class. The aim of this study is to analyse the languages used by the teacher and the students and the students' reactions towards the use of three languages. The instruments used were a background questionnaire, classroom observations, focus group discussions and students' journals. The results indicate that there are important differences between the language used by the teacher and the students and also that most students responded positively to the flexible language use.

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Translanguaging; English medium instruction (EMI); language policy; receptive multilingualism; L3 English

Introduction

English medium instruction (EMI) in higher education has increased substantially in the last decades (Dafouz & Smit, 2019). Nowadays, many courses are taught through the medium of English. In Europe, EMI is more popular in countries such as the Netherlands, Sweden or Norway where proficiency in English is higher than in Southern European countries (Hultgren et al., 2015). However, EMI is also being implemented in countries such as Spain or Italy.

According to a study conducted by Wächter and Maiworm (2014), the use of English as a language of instruction can attract foreign students and academic staff and improve the international competences of local students. In spite of these advantages, there is an ongoing debate that also looks at the threats of 'Englishization' (Kirkpatrick, 2011; Lanvers & Hultgren, 2018). Another issue related to EMI is the effectiveness of its implementation because of the limitations associated with proficiency in English on

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part of students and teachers. This article focuses on enhancing comprehension through translanguaging so as to facilitate students' access to the curriculum in the EMI classroom. It shows that pedagogical translanguaging can be used to achieve this purpose. Research into the strategies that can be used inside the classroom to overcome limitations in comprehension and production skills is urgently needed because of the increasing spread of EMI. This is even more necessary in contexts where the implementation of EMI is more recent and the level of proficiency in English is not very high.

Theoretical framework

One recurrent issue in EMI research is the possible problematic relationship between the students' level of proficiency in English and their comprehension of the content (Macaro et al., 2018). The challenges faced by the students (and in some cases the teachers) may create an obstacle for higher education policies to develop internationalisation through EMI courses. Many studies have reported that students struggle to follow the teacher's explanations and also, to actively use English, either oral or written. As Maiworm and Wächter (2002) argued, there are problems because 'students not able to properly understand, speak, and write English might be taught by teachers incapable of expressing themselves in English' (p. 95). Byun et al. (2011), expressing the same idea, emphasised that we are often dealing with non-native teachers who instruct non-native students. Hu and Lei (2014) identified a number of problems students have in following lessons in English in a Chinese university. They reported that students obtained a shallow understanding of the content, especially when compared with their peers studying in Chinese, who acquired a more comprehensive knowledge. Hu and Lei (2014) also showed their concern about the limited productive skills in the classroom, because students were able to understand some technical terms, but did not feel confident enough to use them. Hellekjaer (2010) collected data from students taking a course in English in three Norwegian and two German universities. The Norwegian students performed better than the German students did in general, but they still had comprehension problems, although Norway is among the countries where the knowledge of English is among the highest in Europe. One of the main challenges for students was to follow the teacher's line of thought (Hellekjaer, 2010). Santos et al. (2018) found out that EMI students feel higher levels of communicative anxiety than students in regular classes because they faced limitations in English proficiency. Byun et al. (2011) conclude that studies carried out in different contexts show that students' understanding of content can be affected in EMI courses and they suggest that more empirical research is needed.

Languages have been generally kept separate in the classroom in order to maximise exposure to the L2 and to think in the L2, avoiding interferences (Littlewood & Yu, 2011). According to Hall and Cook (2012), the avoidance of the L1 is problematic because the monolingual native speaker has been the reference for learners and they have not been prepared to communicate in bilingual and multilingual contexts. Already in 2001, Cook criticised these monolingual ideologies and highlighted the importance of using the L1 in the L2 classroom because it is natural to use the L1 and many teachers use it and also because making connections between the L1 and the L2 can improve language learning. Cook (2001) already proposed that the L1 could be used for different activities in the classroom.

In the last years, flexible approaches have been proposed to avoid the limitations of language separation. These approaches have different names and purposes, but they focus on the learner as a multilingual speaker who uses resources from the whole linguistic repertoire. A concept that has gained currency regarding flexible language policies is translanguaging (Creese & Blackledge, 2010; García & Li, 2014). It can be understood as a language ideology, a theory of bilingualism, a pedagogical stance or a set of practices. Cenoz and Gorter (2017) explain that translanguaging has become an umbrella term, but it always implies that there are no hard boundaries between languages. They refer to 'pedagogical translanguaging' as the strategies used to learn languages based on the learners' whole linguistic repertoire. The specific characteristic of pedagogical translanguaging is that it is planned with the aim of optimising students' learning. Pedagogical translanguaging is closely related to the alternation of languages for input and output as proposed in the original concept of translanguaging developed in Wales (Lewis et al., 2012) but can also include other strategies to develop morphological awareness or writing skills. One type of pedagogical translanguaging has been called 'receptive translanguaging' when the teacher uses one language productively while students use another (Daryai-Hansen et al., 2017). In this case, the conversation is held in more than a language, each speaker using their preferred language but without shifting to the interlocutor's language as long as mutual intelligibility is guaranteed (Ten Thije & Zeevaert, 2007).

The monolingual beliefs seem to be widespread in EMI classes. For example, Doiz and Lasagabaster (2017) conducted a study with EMI teachers at the University of the Basque Country in Spain and reported teachers' beliefs. Most teachers believed that English should be the only language used in the classroom because they were teaching in an EMI program. Roothoof (2019) reported that almost half of instructors participating in a study on EMI in four Spanish universities believed that the use of Spanish should not be allowed in the EMI class.

In spite of this preference for separation, flexible language policies have also been proposed in Higher Education. Karakas (2016) conducted a study in three Turkish universities and found that lecturers supported the use of the L1 in EMI classes. Flexible language policies have been reported to be useful in order to reduce foreign students' comprehension problems and difficulties to interact in the classroom in English-medium higher education in Canada (Marshall, 2020; Van Viegen & Zappa-Hollman, 2020). Another example is provided by Jang (2017), who reflects on the use of L1 in a Korean university. The more proficient students used to translate some ideas that the teacher had explained in English so that everybody could understand what the teacher had said. The policy of the teacher to allow L1 use as well as his knowledge of Korean gave the local language a high status, which made students more willing to use English because they felt more relaxed and confident. Hu and Lei (2014), Roothoof (2019) and Aguilar and Rodríguez (2012) also found that using Chinese, Spanish and Catalan/Spanish, respectively, in the English medium class was a useful strategy for teachers to check comprehension.

Daryai-Hansen et al. (2017) report a study conducted at Roskilde University in Denmark where translanguaging was used for classroom management and language learning. They reported that students perceive translanguaging as a transitional stage until they achieve enough competence to communicate in the target language. Teachers also consider translanguaging as a very useful tool, but the ideal situation seems to be both for teachers and

students to use only the target language. Daryai-Hansen et al. (2017) concluded that monolingual ideologies based on language separation are still pervasive.

Flexible language policies have been adopted by some teachers at the University of the Basque Country (UPV/EHU) in Spain where the current study was carried out. Cenoz and Etxague (2013) remarked that 'the idea of using other languages is seen as a way to avoid difficulties considering the students' limited proficiency in English' (p. 22). They observed an EMI course where students were allowed to use their L1 and they reported that students felt relieved when facing the challenge of having English as the language of instruction.

Another interesting point is that flexible language policies can be used for different purposes inside the classroom. Mazak et al. (2017) reported different translanguaging practices in three different courses at the UPRM bilingual university in Puerto Rico. These practices included explanations about English terminology and acronyms, input in English and discussions in Spanish, using Spanish when students could not understand the input, comparing vocabulary in English and Spanish and giving instructions in Spanish. Luk and Lin (2015) consider L1 use as a scaffold for students because it sets the necessary foundation to then learn new content. The trend towards flexible language policies in the EMI classroom can include different types of practices as we will also see in the current study conducted at the University of the Basque Country (UPV/EHU).

EMI at the University of the Basque Country (UPV/EHU)

The Basque Autonomous Community (BAC) is a region of Spain where both the minority language (Basque) and majority language (Spanish) share a co-official status since the late 1970s. Great efforts have been made to strengthen the position of Basque, and education is one of the areas in which the revitalisation process has been the most successful. The University of the Basque Country (UPV/EHU) is the biggest university of the BAC, with over 40,000 students divided into three different campuses. In 2005, the Multilingualism Plan was launched and teaching through the medium of English has been increasing since. In the academic year 2017–18, a total of 218 courses were offered in English, which poses an important challenge in a country where the level of English is among the lowest in Europe (European Commission, 2012). Other languages like French, German or Italian have also been included in the Multilingualism Plan, but in this academic year, only three courses have been offered through French. Basque medium instruction is increasing in UPV/EHU and almost half of the students choose Basque as the language of instruction by enrolling in the Basque stream. Therefore, there are at least three languages that have to be considered in the UPV/EHU: Basque, Spanish and English.

In this paper, one of the courses included in the Multilingualism Plan is the focus of analysis. The name of the course is *Language Planning: Social and Educational Perspectives*, which is an optional course for second- and third-year students in Social Education. Apart from attending regular classes, students carry out different online activities and interact with each other and the teacher in online forums.

Students in this course are enrolled either in the Basque stream, where all the other courses are taught in Basque, or the Spanish stream, where all the courses are taught in Spanish. Students of the Spanish stream have different levels of competence in Basque, ranging from zero to fluent. Some did not learn Basque at school and do not have passive skills. Others may feel quite confident in Basque but may have chosen to study in Spanish.

The course *Language Planning: Social and Educational Perspectives* is an EMI course but has a flexible language policy. This policy is planned beforehand and it is explained to students before they register for the course. It is also written in the syllabus in these words: 'The materials and lectures are in English but you are free to use English, Basque and Spanish to take part in class and to complete your work'. The teacher delivers the lessons almost exclusively in English, but she allows and encourages the students to use either Basque or Spanish both in the classroom and in their written assignments. This is known by the students and it is in the syllabus, but it is explained on the first day of the course as well. The students do not need to speak or write assignments in English to pass the course and they can use only Basque or Spanish for speaking and writing if they wish to do so. The flexible language policy refers to the fact that students are free to use any of the three languages at any time. The language of the input is English, but the output can be in Basque, Spanish or English. It is a multilingual pedagogy that has been planned and the three languages are used in each class. The teacher is trilingual and she speaks Basque, Spanish and English fluently. Students from the Basque stream and students from the Spanish stream are mixed in the same classroom. As Basque is a minority language, some of the students of the Spanish stream do not understand when students participate in Basque, while all the students from the Basque group are fluent in Spanish. This creates no comprehension problems because the teacher rephrased the Basque comments or questions in English before reacting to them.

The language policy proposed by the teacher aims at reducing comprehension problems and anxiety in the EMI class. The flexible language policy in this course is based on translanguaging understood as 'the ability of multilingual speakers to shuttle between languages, treating the diverse languages that form their repertoire as an integrated system' (Canagarajah, 2011, p. 401). Students can use any of the three languages at any time. Virtually all the materials provided by the teacher are in English and the teacher uses English consistently, but students can decide to use no English at all for speaking and writing in the whole course. The policy goes beyond being lenient about using the L1 in the EMI class and results into the extensive use of three languages in all classes. The teacher uses English and the students use Basque or Spanish most of the time. The class, taken as a whole, can be regarded as a translanguaging space.

The aim of the study is to analyse a flexible language policy that can enhance comprehension in the EMI classroom. This study will focus on the language policy that was implemented in this university course in order to answer the following two research questions:

RQ1: How has a flexible language policy in English as the medium of instruction class been implemented?

RQ2: How did the students react to the flexible language policy in the English as medium of instruction (EMI) class?

Methodology

Sample

Data for this study were collected during two consecutive academic years, with a total of 77 Social Education students. They were observed in the course *Language Planning: Social*

and *Educational Perspectives*, which was taught through the medium of English. The course was taught during the second semester in one 3 h weekly lesson for 15 weeks. All students were in their second or third year of the 3-year degree. The average age was 23.8 years old and 82% of the students were female. The majority of the students came from the Basque Country, but there were a few students with different backgrounds: two students from Latin America, three German students, one student from the south of Spain and another from Catalonia. Except for the German and Catalan students, the students' mother tongue was Basque (28.3%), Spanish (55.6%) or both (13.1%). The Social Education degree was offered in parallel in the Basque and Spanish streams, but for this course, students from the two streams were together in the same class. Apart from two German students everybody was fluent in Spanish, but about 15% of the students did not have any knowledge of Basque or had difficulties with comprehension, which means that whenever a student took part in Basque in class they could not follow unless the teacher provided them with a translation. This was the only course that was offered in English in the whole degree and they did not have any extra English classes to help them with this course.

The students' competence in the three languages present in the classroom was self-assessed on a scale from 1 to 10 and the results are shown in [Table 1](#).

Although we asked the students to report on their level of the three languages, we were especially concerned about the students' actual English level at the beginning of the semester. So, they completed an Oxford Placement Test (OUP) with 100 multiple-choice items. Oral and written productive skills were not tested because students could but did not have to use English in the discussions and assignments. The average grade of the 2 years was 51.5/100 and the results were similar in both editions. Test scores between 40 and 60 indicate a B1 level according to the CEFR and most students (69.58%) got scores corresponding to B1 level. Some students (19.56%) obtained lower scores, between 30 and 39 and only 10.86% obtained higher scores, between 61 and 89. Students also completed the test at the end of the course and the results indicate that they had improved their level of English from $M=51.48$ ($SD=14.65$) to $M=54.26$ ($SD=12.87$). This difference is significant ($t=-3.026$, $p=0.005$), but the level at the end of the course was still B1.

Instruments

Participants filled in a background questionnaire so as to provide information about their age, gender, birthplace, mother tongue(s) and whether they were studying through Basque or Spanish at university. All data were entered in SPSS.

Three further instruments were used to elicit the data: classroom observation, focus group discussions and journals written by the students. All lessons during the two semesters of data collection were audiotaped and observed by the first author. A total of 45 h were recorded in the two courses. The most relevant passages were selected and

Table 1. Students' self-assessed average knowledge of three languages (on scale from 1 to 10).

Basque	Spanish	English
7.8	9.2	4.9

transcribed in detail. During the lessons, extensive field notes were taken which were later analysed together with the recordings.

A few weeks before the end of the course, five semi-structured focus group discussions were organised with the students. In the first year of the study, both the Basque and the Spanish group were mixed in the three focus group discussions. Those discussions were conducted in Spanish and both Basque-speaking students and non-Basque-speaking students were mixed. We noticed that some Basque-speaking students may have felt a little restrained, so in the second year, the idea was that more information could be obtained if the two groups were separated: those studying for their degree in Basque and those studying in Spanish. We perceived a feeling of complicity in the Basque-speaking group, as if they could express anything they wished, and they realised they shared some common concerns regarding the language policy of the course. Each group consisted of about 10–12 students. All discussions were audio- and videotaped and later transcribed in their entirety. The recordings of the focus groups last about four and a half hours in total. As part of the course, each student had to write a journal on a weekly basis, where they had to tell about their experience in relation to the course, in particular how they felt about language use in the classroom. Students were free to use Basque, Spanish or English in this assignment. The individual weekly journals from both years comprise a total of 1,019 journal entries. Students gave permission to use their entries in the journal for the research study, provided that their names remained anonymous.

The transcriptions of the classroom observations and the focus group discussions, as well as the field notes and the journal entries, were coded according to the language used with the software package for qualitative data analysis Atlas.ti.

Results

The results will be presented in order to answer the research questions. First, we will look at students' attitudes towards the flexible language policy and then at the way pedagogical translanguaging was implemented in the classroom.

RQ1: How has a flexible language policy in English as the medium of instruction class been implemented?

First, we look at students' attitudes by observing the way the three languages were used when they were addressing the teacher or classmates in the classroom. [Table 2](#) shows the number of students' utterances and percentages in each of the languages.

These figures show that the three languages were used to a different extent, Spanish being the most often used language, followed by Basque, and finally English. Besides, a high percentage of the utterances in English were very short utterances, even only simple words like 'yes', 'no', 'more', 'ok', etc. Some others were repetitions of what the teacher said in English. An example of students' use of English can be seen here:

Table 2. Students' use of the different languages in the classroom.

	Basque	Spanish	English
Year 1	29 (10.4%)	163 (58.6%)	86 (30.9%)
Year 2	254 (48%)	204 (38.6%)	71 (13.4%)
Total	283 (35.1%)	367 (45.5%)	157 (19.5%)

T: any idea of the number of languages in the world? how many ... ?

S1: three thousand.

T: three thousand? yeah? more or less? 3000 is the=

S2: =more!

T: more languages than 3000 ... ?

S3: six.

T: six thousand? yeah, yeah, that's more or less what's estimated.

Classroom Interaction_1

In the first year group, there were three German students who mainly took part in English, and they produced many of the English utterances in Year 1. As we have seen Spanish is the language that is used most but Basque also has a presence. There are some differences between the two years. The fact that in the second year there were more Basque-speaking students might have influenced that Basque was used more often in the second year. What is more, in this group, a few students who insisted on using Basque were especially active in the course, too.

Another tool that we used to elicit data on the language use of the students were the journals. They had to write a weekly entry explaining how they felt in the class. The students were free to write their journal in Basque, Spanish or English. Spanish was clearly the main language with 551 entries (54.1%), then Basque with 377 (37%) and finally English was used in 91 entries (8.9%). These figures show surprisingly similar results in both years, as it can be seen in [Table 3](#). This is interesting because as we have already seen in [Table 2](#), there were important differences from Year 1 to Year 2 in oral language use inside the classroom. The number of entries in English is the lowest, and they are inserted in Basque- or Spanish-written journals. Some students decided to write one or two entries in English, explicitly mentioning that they wanted to practice by writing a text in English. Seven students combined the three languages of the course in the journal, making use of resources in their whole linguistic repertoire.

Regarding the teacher's language use, it was observed that she applied the language policy of the class quite strictly and used English consistently. This can be seen in the data gathered during the observations. Leaving aside local references that were logically made either in Basque or Spanish, we collected only about 100 examples of utterances or expressions by the teacher in Basque or Spanish in 45 h of recording. The teacher only translated English words that she seemed to consider too difficult for most students to understand, providing them with a translation in both Basque and Spanish (49.6%), or only in Spanish (40%). Only 10.4% of the translations were only in Basque.

Table 3. Number of journal entries according to the language used.

	Basque	Spanish	English
Year 1	229 (37.2%)	331 (53.8%)	55 (9.1%)
Year 2	148 (36.9%)	220 (54.5%)	36 (8.9%)
Total	377 (37%)	551 (54.1%)	91 (8.9%)

The interaction with the students seems to exert an influence on the teacher's choice, because during episodes when the students spoke more Basque, the teacher also used more Basque herself. The teacher demonstrates that she is aware of the fact that many students are studying in the Basque stream. Her accommodation to them is shown by the fact that she translates uncommon English words in both languages, although everybody would understand it in Spanish only. Another example comes from the classroom observations, when during an exercise the teacher showed some signposts written in the variety resulting from the contact between Spanish and English also called *Spanglish*, and she immediately translated them all into Basque, even though all students in the classroom would have perfectly understood the signs without any extra help.

The teacher's use of English can be observed in the following examples. Students had serious difficulties to understand videos in English, and a student once asked the teacher if she could translate what the video was about:

S4: Sara? (teachers' name)

T: yes?

S4: no nos podrías hacer un resumen del vídeo que acabas de poner en la web? es que no consigo entender absolutamente nada ... *[original in Spanish] could you make a summary of the video you just played on the web? I understand absolutely nothing...*

T: yeah, well, we can ... no, not in Spanish, we can do it in English later. let's see this one and then (...)

Classroom Interaction_2

The teacher was reluctant to translate into Spanish what she had just said in English. This was not the only situation where the teacher maintained English in the class. In one of the many bilingual conversations that took place during the course, in which the teacher used English and the student spoke Basque or Spanish, the teacher accidentally switched to Basque, but she immediately apologised, went on in English and justified herself with a metalinguistic comment about code-switching. After that, they kept having a Basque–English mixed conversation as if nothing had happened:

T: they don't use it, never ...

S5: ta inkluso galtzeraino. jendea ez dakina lau hitz jarraian euskeraz esaten eta ez dakina ... *[and even losing it. People who don't know saying a few words in Basque and who don't know ...]*

T: zergatik o ... sorry, why? *[Why...]*

[SS laugh]

T: we are code-switching. so why do you think it happens?

S5: bueno, hemen ... nik ez dakit, herrietan errealitatea modu batekoa da, hemen errealitatea beste ... *[Well, here... I don't know, in the villages the reality is different, here the reality is another ...]*

Classroom Interaction_3

Nevertheless, the teacher's language practices become more flexible either in the break or once the lesson has finished, for which students were grateful, as one of them stated in the focus group discussion.

(...) y luego si le preguntas cualquier cosa, a solas, después de clase o, te responde en tu idioma. Por lo menos eso, tiene ese detalle de decirte, para que tú entiendas.

[Original in Spanish] 'And then if you ask her something, alone, after the class, she answers in your language. At least that, she is nice enough to tell you, so that you understand'.

We will later see how the language policy initially struck students as strange, but they got used to it quite rapidly.

In sum, the implementation of pedagogical translanguaging on part of the teacher was based on her consistent use of English with a few exceptions and the possibility she gave students to use Basque and Spanish as well. Pedagogical translanguaging does not refer to the language use by the teacher but to planned strategy to use the three languages in every class. The teacher used English and most students only used Basque or Spanish in class.

After having described the use of the different languages in the EMI class, we now turn to presenting the results related to the second research question.

RQ2: How did the students react to the flexible language policy in the English as medium of instruction (EMI) class?

As it has already been mentioned, the specific language policy of the class was regarded as strange in the beginning of the course. Students were not used to hold a conversation in more than one language, even less when one of the languages is English. However, they needed little time to get used to it, as several students pointed out during the focus group discussions. In a focus group discussion in Basque, the following conversation took place:

Moderator: Eta orain, irakasleari ingelesez erantzuteko presiorik sentitzen duzue?

S1: Oain ez. Aurreneko egunean galdetzen hasi zanin ta hola ... zan nahi ta ezin bat, nik pertsonalki, e! Euskeraz erantzun nahi, baina esaten dut, 'joe, nola erantzungo diot euskeraz, ingelesez ari zait', ez? Orain ia bai, baino hasieran, ez dakit, ematen zun ...

S2: Rarua eiten zan.

S1: Bai ...

M: Ta? Gero ohitu gera eta arazorik gabe egiten da ... ?

S1: Bai.

Moderator: And now [after a few weeks], do you feel any pressure to answer to the teacher in English?

S1: Not now. On the first day, when she started to ask and so ... I had a feeling of helplessness, me personally. I wanted to answer in Basque but I said 'well, how am I going to answer in Basque if she is talking to me in English?'. Now I can, but in the beginning, I don't know, it looked like ...

S2: It was strange.

S1: Yes.

M: And now? You got used to it and you do it without any problem ... ?

S1: Yes.

Students considered beneficial that the teacher implemented such a flexible language policy in the course, that is, that they were given the opportunity to use the mother tongue in the classroom. The following journal excerpts show their positive attitudes:

Klaseko malgutasunari (hizkuntzaren aldetik, euskara edo gazteleraz hitz egin edo idatzeko aukera baitugu) esker izango ez balitz, ez nintzateke ikasgai hau hautatzera ausartuko.

[Original in Basque] If it were not for the flexibility of the class (because of the language, the possibility of speaking or writing in Basque or Spanish), I would not dare choose this course.

También se han hablado de cosas como qué opinión tenemos acerca de que la profesora hable en inglés y nosotros tengamos la opción de responder en inglés, euskera y lengua, en general a todas/os nos parecía bien.

[Original in Spanish] We have also talked [in the focus group discussion] about issues like our opinion on the teacher using English and us having the option to respond in English, Basque and Spanish, in general everybody was happy with it.

Hala ere, nik nahi dudana hizkuntzan erantzun eta idatzi dezakedala jakiteak lasaitu egin nau, modu honetan, entzumenez askorik ulertu ez arren, ariketak egiteko erraztasuna izango baitut.

[Original in Basque] However, it calms me down to know that I can answer and write in the language I prefer, although I do not understand much [when the teacher speaks in English], it will be easy for me to do the activities.

Students are aware that all the three languages were present in the course, but made comments on the teacher's nearly only-English production. In the following example, a student mentions that issue in an exaggerated way in one of the focus group discussions:

Sí, yo creo que, o sea, se habla tanto castellano, euskera, o sea, la profesora en inglés evidentemente, que no se le escapa nada en castellano ni queriendo ...

[Original in Spanish] Yes, I think that, I mean, Spanish as well as Basque are spoken, I mean, the teacher obviously speaks English, there is no way she uses Spanish, not even by chance

As we said in the results of the first research question, the teacher only translated what she said into Basque or Spanish when she thought that it could not have been understood in English. That is what students noticed, as some of them reflect in a discussion:

Moderator: ¿Ella siempre, la profesora siempre ha hablado en inglés?

S1: Sí, sí, sí ...

M: Casi siempre, siempre ...

S2: En algún momento ...

S3: Igual para contestar alguna cosa concreta o así, pues sí que utilizaba el euskera o el castellano...

S4: Para traducir alguna palabra o algo ...

M: Que no se entendía igual en inglés, o ...

S3: Sí, sí.

Moderator: She always, the teacher always speaks in English?

S1: Yes, yes, yes ...

M: Nearly always, always

S2: Sometimes ...

S3: Maybe to answer something specific or so, then she does use Basque or Spanish.

S4: To translate some word or something.

M: That was not understood in English, or ...

S3: Yes, yes.

Just a few students complained about the teacher that she was not being flexible enough to translate from English so that they could understand better. In the following entry, an explicit claim is expressed by a student, who tells her experience with the teacher:

Yo el primer día ya me acuerdo que ... en el descanso no, pero cuando acabó la clase, fui a donde ella, y le dije que a ver si podía comentar algunas cosas en euskera o en castellano, y dijo que no, que era una clase en inglés, y yo le dije, le reconocí que era súper cansino, pero de buen rollo, ella ya me entendió, y dijo 'ya, ya lo sé que os cuesta, porque tener que pensar en inglés y traducir a vuestro idioma cansa el doble y tal', y yo le decía que me sentía realmente cansado, que para el descanso ya estaba súper cansado, de prestar atención, y luego no le prestabas tanto ya ... desconectaba un poco y ... se lo dije.

[Original in Spanish] On the first day I remember I went to talk to her, not during the break, but when the class was over, I asked her if she could say some things in Basque or in Spanish, and she said no, that it was an English medium class, and I told her, I admitted that it was really exhausting, in a good mood though, she understood me and said 'yes, I know you have a hard time with it, because you need to think in English and then translating it into your language tires you out', and I told her that I felt worn out, that by the break I was already very tired, after so much time paying attention, and then I could not any more, I lost contact for a while ... and I told her.

The feeling of exhaustion was repeated among the students who needed to make an extra effort to follow the teacher's explanations. Nonetheless, according to the students, the anxiety that they were bound to undergo was diminished by the use of Basque and Spanish by the students both in class and when completing tasks as this journal excerpt shows:

Respecto a la realización de los trabajos, me alivia muchísimo que se puedan entregar en español, euskera o inglés ...

[Original in Spanish] Regarding the completion of the works, I am very relieved that they can be delivered in Spanish, Basque or English ...

Conclusions

The study reported here was conducted in a context in which EMI is being implemented as in many other contexts in Europe and elsewhere. Research shows that even though EMI can have advantages regarding internationalisation, it also faces some challenges regarding comprehension and production due to the limitations of English proficiency (Byun et al., 2011; Hu & Lei, 2014; Maiworm & Wächter, 2002). The study reported here points in the direction that flexible language policies could mitigate these difficulties even in contexts in which proficiency in English is not high, but this possibility needs to be confirmed in future studies.

The use of a flexible language policy can be understood as a scaffold in a context where the general level of English among the students is low (Aguilar & Rodríguez, 2012; Luk & Lin, 2015). Students would have had a lot more difficulties if they had not been allowed to use other languages. The teacher was consistent in the use of English with a few exceptions when specific English terminology or local terms were used (see also Karakas, 2016; Mazak et al., 2017). By using English, students had to make an effort to follow the class in their third language. In fact, some students expressed in their journals and the focus group discussions that they felt worn out after a lesson in English. At the same time, they acknowledged that translanguaging made it more bearable for them to follow the class, both because the teacher also used the students' L1 when she deemed it necessary and because students could freely choose among three languages. Our study confirms the results reported by Hu and Lei (2014), Daryai-Hansen et al. (2017) or Pun and Macaro (2019) who also found that using the L1 could be useful in EMI contexts.

Even though our study shows that students can react positively to the flexible language policy proposed by the teacher, it could be argued that this policy does not promote the use of English for production. In fact, the use of English both in classroom interaction (19.5%) and in diaries (8.9%) was very limited. These percentages indicate that there is room for improvement regarding English productive skills. However, the flexible language policy adopted in this course has allowed students to take a course thought the medium of English in spite of their limited proficiency. The consistent use of English on part of the teacher and the materials has given students the opportunity to have the exposure to English they would not have had if the course had been taught in Basque or Spanish. In fact, the results of the Oxford Placement Test indicate that there was a significant increase in their level of English and this implies that translanguaging was helping to develop their comprehension skills in the EMI classes even if they were not required to use English for production.

Another issue to consider is that the focus of EMI is content and not language. Language proficiency can improve as the result of EMI, but EMI can also provide the opportunity of using a larger number of resources for teaching and learning content because of the wide use of English in academic texts. The flexible language policy adopted in this course and the support provided by the online materials allowed students to follow the course. This policy, based on the use of pedagogical translanguaging, could have allowed students to follow the content of the course with lower levels of anxiety than if the course was taught in English only but empirical evidence is necessary to confirm this finding (see also Jang, 2017).

This study has some limitations because it is based on a single situation and some specific pedagogical translanguaging strategies. Obtaining data from other teachers who implement a similar language policy in the classroom might offer interesting insights and the possibility of comparing different strategies to develop flexible language policies. In spite of these limitations, the study shows that using pedagogical translanguaging strategies in the context of flexible language policies can provide opportunities for EMI even when proficiency in English is limited.

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