



# Spanish Higher Education: EMI Students' Needs for Language Support Courses (ESP)

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**Annotation.** Given the endangered status of language support courses and the scarcity of research on the linguistic needs of EMI students in Spanish higher education, this study aims to investigate EMI students' needs for language support and the potential of ESP courses in improving their English language skills. A mixed-method approach was used. The study results will contribute to filling the existing gap in EMI literature and inform stakeholders who are making major decisions on language support systems.

**Keywords:** *Spanish Higher Education, English for Specific Purposes (ESP), English Medium Instruction (EMI), students' language support.*

## Introduction

English as the medium of instruction in content courses has rapidly expanded due to the globalization and internationalization of society. Even though in its “infancy stage” (Galloway & Rose, 2021), there is an apparent demand for research on content courses in English, also called English Medium Instruction (EMI) courses and the role of their student's linguistic skills. With ever-increasing global demand, students need not only to acquire linguistic competence in English but are also required to achieve competence for a globalised and internationalised environment (Chapple, 2015; Dearden, 2018; Galloway & Ruegg, 2020; Karakas, 2016).

Previous EMI research has shown that due to the surging number of courses in English, the need for English for Specific Purposes (ESP) courses and/or English for

Academic Purposes (EAP) has increased in many universities across different countries (Galloway et al., 2017; Fortanet-Gómez & Räisänen, 2008). However, regarding Spanish higher education institutions, the response to the increasing number of EMI courses has been the opposite. Some stakeholders tend to believe that Integrated Content and Language in Higher Education (ICLHE) and EMI courses can substitute ESP courses, which has raised deep concerns (Lasagabaster & Doiz, 2021). Even though there has been a decrease in ESP courses that may endanger their existence, some authors believe that ESP courses should be offered alongside EMI courses so that specific linguistic competence and “articulate vocational concepts” (Kırkgöz & Dikilitaş, 2018, p.1) are targeted.

Given the possible benefits of ESP courses and the significant role of students’ language skills in their EMI studies, the possibility of the extinction of ESP courses in higher education raises a big concern about what will happen to those students who need linguistic support; particularly those who do not have the minimum level required in English to successfully perform in EMI courses. This issue is even more noticeable in the Spanish context. According to the EF English Proficiency Index (2020) Spanish students’ English language competence is one of the lowest among European countries. Moreover, literature on EMI in Spanish higher education highlights language proficiency as one of the main concerns (Aguilar & Arno-Macia, 2018; Arno-Macia & Mancho-Bares, 2015; Doiz et al., 2013; Pavon, 2020). Thus, given the fact that there is very little research on the needs of EMI students’ linguistic support at university level, particularly in Spain, it is key to investigate to what extent EMI students require linguistic support. In a similar vein, the impact and contribution of ESP courses to EMI students’ English language skills should be analysed, especially considering the tendency of ESP course extinction at universities and given the growth of EMI courses and students’ English language competence. For this purpose, the following research questions have been designed with the aim of investigating EMI students’ needs for language support and the contribution of ESP courses in improving their English language skills:

1. To what extent do EMI university students feel the need for support?
2. How can ESP courses help EMI students to improve their English language skills?

In this paper, the focus will be on EMI courses at the University of Málaga (Spain) and the likely need for ESP courses for students taking EMI courses. Data on EMI students’ and teachers’ perceptions will be provided to give insight into the current development of EMI courses and for future discussion about the development of EMI courses and its needs. Since Spain is “one of the southern European countries in which EMI is more widespread at preuniversity than at university level” (Lasagabaster, 2019, p. 11), there seems to be a need to discuss this type of courses at university level.

## Literature Review

### *Theoretical Perspectives*

Although the phenomenon of EMI has existed in education for some time, it was not until 2015 that Dearden, a researcher at Oxford, together with her research group defined it as “the use of the English language to teach academic subjects in countries or jurisdictions where the first language (L1) of the majority of the population is not English” (Dearden, 2014, p. 2). In 2018 Macaro broadened Dearden’s definition by adding and clarifying that academic subjects must be non-linguistic subjects but content subjects. In general, it must be said that EMI is an umbrella term that covers different definitions regarding bilingual education and commonly found in other countries (but not Spain) while discussing compulsory education

The ELT Expert Panel (Oxford) uses the term EMI emphasising the different world-wide models of bilingual and English-only education (2020); which can also be observed with the term Content Language Integrated Learning (CLIL). In Spain, the term CLIL is commonly associated with compulsory education, while ICLHE pertains to university education. However, Barbara Schmidt-Unterberger (2018) argues that neither CLIL nor ICLHE aligns well with the dynamics of most university settings due to their fundamental emphasis on the equal importance of content and language learning objectives. Consequently, EMI seems to emerge as a more adequate choice for university settings. This viewpoint is supported by Lasagabaster (2019), who asserts that “EMI is the right label to use at the tertiary level in Spain because there is no dual focus on language and content, in stark contrast to pre-university levels where the label CLIL is widely used” (p.12).

### *Previous Research*

Arno-Macia and Aguilar’s (2018) study analysed the presence of courses such as Internationalisation at Home (IaC), EMI and ESP in diverse bachelor’s degrees in seven public universities in Catalonia. One of the findings of the study revealed that EMI courses “outnumber ESP courses with a much longer tradition,” which suggested that “EMI is at the very least overshadowing ESP, if not replacing it” (Arno-Macia & Aguilar, 2018, p. 203). Likewise, Gonzalez Ardeo (2013) compared the number of CLIL courses since their introduction in 2005 with the number of ESP courses present in 2012 at the University of the Basque Country. Even though the term CLIL originated for a lower educational context, it can be found applied to higher education such as seen in this study. The results showed a dramatic increase of CLIL courses, from 0 to even 82 courses in the faculty of Engineering, with a sharp increase in other faculties as well. This clearly showed an overall preference of CLIL courses over ESP which brought him to the conclusion that “the recent evolution of CLIL and ESP in tertiary settings

within the BAC seems to predict that ESP will be soon fading away with the advent of CLIL” (Gonzalez Ardeo, 2013, p. 35). In addition to this comparative analysis, Gonzalez Ardeo (2013) also conducted a small case study with engineering students at the same university to understand their experiences with CLIL and ESP courses. The findings of the analysis of students’ questionnaires supported the findings of the course comparison, with the students unsure about the need for ESP courses when CLIL courses were offered, but they were sure about the necessity of CLIL courses. Interestingly, the students were “very much in favour of the compatibility of ESP and CLIL lessons” (Gonzalez Ardeo, 2013, p. 39). Moreover, Arno-Macia and Mancho-Bares’ (2014) study findings in one Catalan university also support the tendency of an increasing number of CLIL courses over ESP. Both lecturers and students had positive attitudes towards CLIL subjects because they were seen as more communicative courses compared to ESP courses, which they thought were more grammar courses where no real communication was taking place. However, it is important to note that no language support was present in CLIL courses, which was one of the students’ concerns. As a result, some of the students expressed the need for language support due to their lower English language proficiency, which was one of the main challenges.

Although some research shows concerns about the future of ESP in Spanish university education (Arno-Macia & Aguilar, 2018; Lasagabaster & Doiz, 2021), there is also some research though scarce which shows the positive learning outcomes using ESP as a language support course for EMI students (Arnó-Macià et al., 2020). The authors (Arnó-Macià et al., 2020, p. 71) concluded that “ESP can respond to the new demands on academic communication skills posed by participation in EMI courses,” the students reported “different types of learning gains, regardless of their proficiency level,” also, the students felt they “improved English fluency, accuracy, and an expansion of technical vocabulary.” Moreover, the research findings suggested that an ESP course helped engineering students to boost their confidence which is one of the key variables related to language proficiency, and as the findings suggest, the students’ confidence must be increased to help them be more productive and efficient in their English taught subjects. However, the researchers also emphasized that to achieve all possible gains offered by ESP courses, ESP courses must be tailored to meet EMI students’ specific needs. The benefits of ESP and the necessity of tailoring ESP courses to better meet EMI students’ linguistic needs are prevalent in EMI research in other educational contexts as well (Costa & Mastellotto, 2022; Evans & Morrison, 2011; Galloway & Ruegg, 2020; Rose et al., 2019).

Therefore, considering the limited but suggestive research indicating potential and significant benefits for EMI students through the provision of ESP courses as linguistic support, it becomes paramount to investigate whether EMI students perceive the need for ESP courses and to examine how ESP courses can contribute to enhancing their

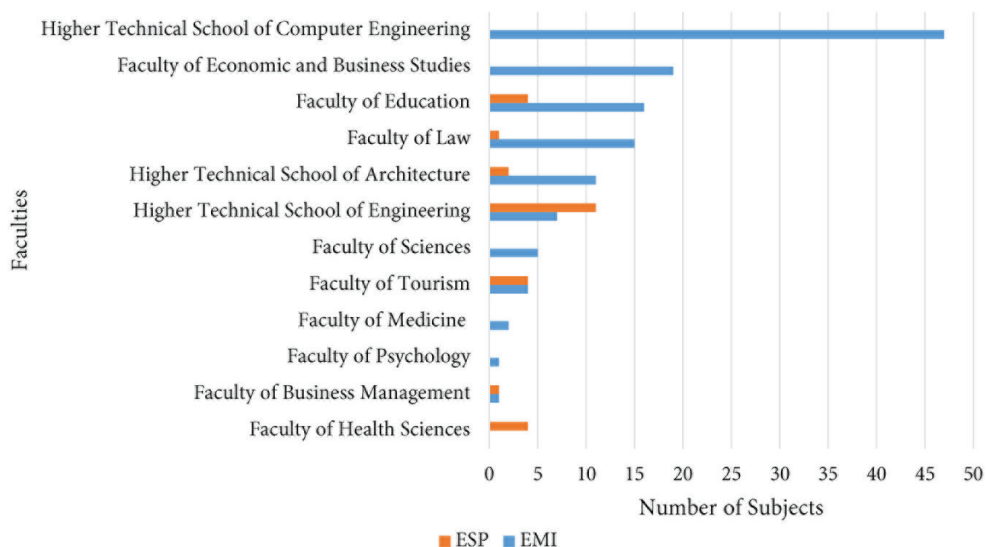
English language skills. In fact, such enhancements may be essential to ensure greater productivity and success in their EMI studies.

## Methodology

### *Context of the Study*

The study was conducted at the University of Malaga (UMA), a monolingual autonomous region in southern Spain. Despite not having full English Medium Instruction (EMI) degrees, UMA offers some EMI courses. In line with the research described in the previous section, the number of EMI courses (128) in the 2020–2021 academic year is significantly higher than ESP courses (27). Figure 1 below illustrates this trend. Linguistic degree students, who have more language input, were not included in Figure 1 as the focus was on non-linguistic subjects in English. The Faculty of Economics and Business studies and the Faculty of Engineering have a higher number of EMI courses, possibly due to the long-standing tradition of ESP for Engineering compared to other fields. The Faculty of Fine Art and Faculty of Social Work and Studies do not offer EMI or ESP courses. Currently, there is no specific language policy for entering an EMI course, and students are recommended to have a B1 or B2 level of English, depending on the course.

**Figure 1**  
*EMI and ESP Subjects at UMA*



## *Research Design*

To answer the research questions, this study employed a mixed-method approach, combining students' questionnaires and teachers' semi-structured interviews. This approach allowed us to leverage the strengths of both qualitative and quantitative research. Moreover, a mixed-method approach not only provides triangulation, which enhances research validity, but also facilitates "multi-level analysis of complex issues", as noted by Dornyei (2007, p. 45).

## *Participants*

The participants for this study were selected from one university. The quantitative research design included undergraduate and postgraduate students who were non-native English speakers studying non-linguistic subjects in English. The goal was to obtain 150 EMI student responses. According to Dornyei (2007), "in the survey literature a range of between one percent of the population is usually mentioned as the magic sampling fraction, with a minimum of about 100 participants" (p. 99). However, for determining the final sample size, he also recommends "leaving a decent margin to account for unforeseen or unplanned circumstances" (Dornyei, 2007, p. 100). Thus, data analysis began after 149 students, representing 3.88% of the EMI student population at UMA, completed the questionnaire. The majority (116) were from the Faculty of Economics, and the remaining participants (33) were from the Faculty of Tourism. It is important to note that both local and international students took part in the survey since international students are commonly present in EMI classes. Including international students was crucial to gain a more realistic understanding of the EMI context as their presence contributes to a multilingual classroom environment.

For the qualitative approach, the sample consisted of two groups of teachers. Six language teachers specializing in English for Specific Purposes (ESP) and four content teachers involved in English Medium Instruction (EMI) participated in the semi-structured interviews. The language teachers, who taught various ESP courses such as Tourism, Architecture, and Nursing, were from the same department of English, French, and German Philology at UMA. Their teaching experience ranged from six months to over 20 years. The content teachers had a more homogeneous background. They had been teaching different content subjects primarily related to Economics and Law for many years, and their experience teaching in English varied from 6 to 10 years.

## *Data Collection and Procedure*

### *Quantitative Data*

The quantitative data collection for this study took place from February 2021 to May 2021. An online questionnaire through Google Forms was used to collect the data. As this study is part of a bigger project, the questionnaire consisted of five parts, primarily containing closed-ended questions with Likert scale responses. However, only the findings related to the research questions on the needs of EMI language support will be provided. For data management and analysis, SPSS 25 was used. Both descriptive (frequencies and percentages of agreement and disagreement) and inferential statistics (Kruskal-Wallis test) were run.

### *Qualitative Data*

Qualitative data were collected using semi-structured interviews in English with six language teachers and four content teachers. All the teachers were given a choice to decide on the form of the interview: online, face-to-face or in writing. The majority preferred to participate online (via Zoom).

The interview questions were based on the students' questionnaire (a primary research instrument) which was informed by literature review on EMI emerging themes and issues. Prior to the interviews, ethical approval was obtained from all participants, which was sent via email along with the interview questions. This allowed teachers to familiarise themselves with the questions and take more time to think about the issues in-depth, thereby enhancing the quality of their responses.

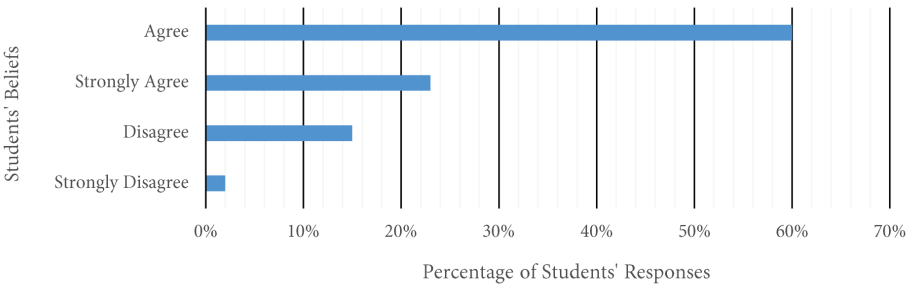
To process the qualitative research data, thematic analysis was employed. Both deductive and inductive approaches were used which helped to stay focused on the research questions and, at the same time, not omit any emerging themes in the interviews (Bingham & Witkowsky, 2022), which revealed significant data for the discussion of the interview findings.

## **Results**

### *The EMI Students' Needs for Linguistic Support*

It can be seen from the data in Figure 2 below, a significant majority of students (83%) agreed or strongly agreed on the necessity of ESP courses. Conversely, the percentage of students who disagreed was low, with only 15% expressing disagreement and a mere 2% strongly disagreeing.

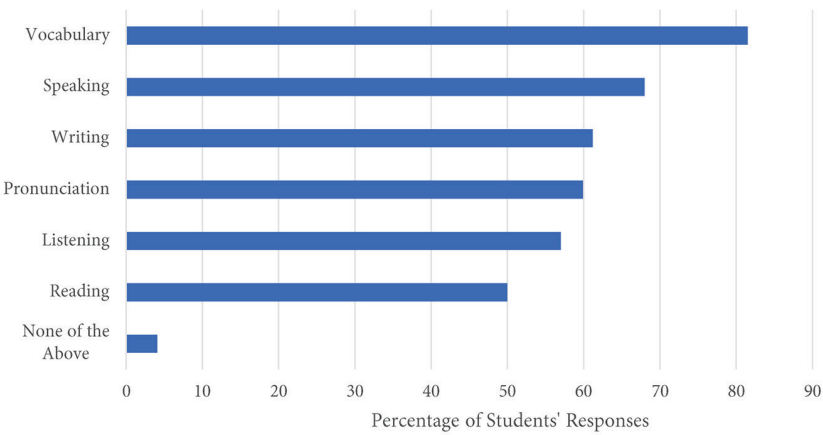
**Figure 2**  
*Students' Beliefs on the Necessity of Language Support Courses*



Furthermore, quantitative findings revealed that students not only felt strongly about the necessity of language support, but they also believed in the benefits of ESP courses for doing an EMI subject. All respondents had to answer a multiple-choice question allowing them to choose more than one option related to language skills. Most students selected multiple options, indicating that they believed ESP courses could help improve all four language skills (speaking, writing, reading, and listening). Study results show that 91.2 % of the students believed that ESP courses can help improve their English.

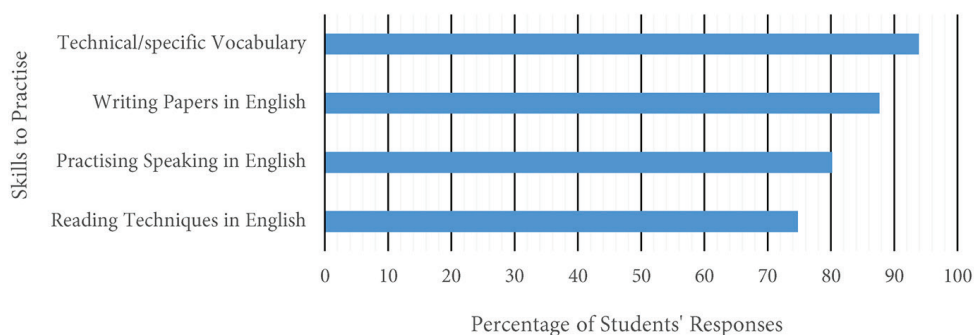
Despite the students' beliefs that ESP courses can improve all four language skills, the highest percentage of the responses were related to the belief of improving specific vocabulary related to their field of study (81.5%) followed by speaking skills (68%), writing (61.2%), pronunciation (59.9%), listening (57%), and reading (50%). There was a very low percentage of students (4.1%) who did not believe that ESP courses can help enhance their English language skills. See Figure 3 below.

**Figure 3**  
*Students' Beliefs on the Effectiveness of English Language Support Course in Improving Their English*



Moreover, when the students who have taken ESP courses were asked (a multiple-choice question) what they would like to learn more in those courses, the percentage of students expressing the need to learn subject-specific vocabulary was even higher at 93.3% (see Figure 4). However, interestingly, although most teachers during the interviews stated that they did very little writing in class, the majority (87.7%) of the students also expressed agreement/strong agreement to learn how to write papers in English which suggests that the students find this skill beneficial not only for their EMI courses but probably thinking about their future careers or their personal lives as well. Another surprising finding was that 74.8% of the students would like to learn more about reading techniques in English although 92.5 % of them indicated that they felt confident reading in English when they were asked a question regarding their four language skills.

**Figure 4**  
*Students Would Like to Learn More in ESP Courses*



The quantitative findings (provided above) concerning students' desire for the improvement of terminology and speaking skills (see Figure 4) are corroborated by qualitative evidence from teachers' semi-structured interviews. Almost all the teachers (ESP and EMI) concurred that English speaking skills and subject-related vocabulary must be the top priority in ESP courses. Also, the students' presentation skills were highlighted as one of the key skills to be improved. As one EMI teacher put it when asked how ESP courses could help EMI students:

I mean, of course, everything is good, but if I must focus on one skill, this is speaking because it's the skill that you are going to use in the real world. This is the skill that students typically are less proficient.

In addition, it is crucial to underscore that the qualitative data of this study revealed that most teachers related students' speaking skills to their confidence. For this reason, some teachers stressed the need to boost students' confidence: "they need support to

be convinced that they are good enough and that they are able to communicate in English” (EMI teacher 7). In a similar vein, one of the ESP teachers thought that ESP courses could help EMI students by “giving security to their performance. Feeling that they are good enough in their speaking”.

It is significant to mention that although two EMI teachers were not sure if ESP courses were necessary “in every case” or “strictly necessary,” they stated that “they [ESP courses] are useful tools” and “any support is welcome.” In a similar vein, most ESP teachers also agreed that not all students need linguistic support and thus, believed it depends on the course itself and students’ level of English.

Furthermore, one of the ESP teachers stressed the importance of ESP courses and expressed her/his concern about the misalignment/unity of the study programmes in Andalusian universities, meaning that depending on the university, in some degrees, ESP courses are obligatory, whereas in others, some students do not have such subject. The teacher reported:

I have been teaching Nursing, and I don’t know the programmes, the curriculums of every degree in Andalucía, but there were students from other universities that came, and they didn’t have these subjects. “I don’t have to study English in Seville, or I don’t have to study English for Nursing in Cordoba, and now here it is compulsory”. So, I could say that at least everybody has the same opportunities regarding public education.

Likewise, most ESP teachers believed that there should be at least one ESP course in every degree; however, some of them were not sure whether they should be obligatory courses or optional.

To obtain a more thorough comprehension of a deeper understanding of the students’ language needs, this study also investigated the influence of two variables, the students’ year of study and their English language proficiency, on their need for language support.

### *Students’ year of study and the need for language support*

As shown in Table 1, students from different academic stages participated in the questionnaire. Notably, the largest proportion consisted of third-year students, accounting for nearly half of the participants, followed by first-year students, comprising 23.8%. This distribution provides valuable insights into the research question as first-year students have recently transitioned from secondary school and offer a fresh perspective, while third-year students possess experience and can compare their university experiences.

**Table 1***Distribution of Students by Year of Study*

| Year of Study | Frequency | Valid Percent |
|---------------|-----------|---------------|
| First         | 35        | 23.8          |
| Second        | 16        | 10.9          |
| Third         | 68        | 46.3          |
| Fourth        | 12        | 8.2           |
| Fifth         | 4         | 2.7           |
| Master's      | 12        | 8.2           |
| Total         | 147       | 100           |

Kruskal-Wallis H test was conducted to see whether there were any differences among students' different years of study and their need for linguistic support. There were statistically significant differences observed ( $p = 0.024$  which is more than 0.05). See Table 2 below. Interestingly, the mean ranks of the first year and third-year students were almost the same. This might be explained by the fact that most students who participated in this study were the students doing a degree in Economics and for most of them it was the first year at university when they were undertaking a course in English.

It is worth noting that quantitative results showed that 140 out of 147 students believed that finishing bilingual secondary school can help them to do an EMI course at university. This is also supported by the qualitative findings of this research. Most teachers from both cohorts stated that the students with previous experience in EMI courses find them easier compared to the ones with no experience at all. As one EMI teacher described his/her students taking a subject in English for the first time: "for them it's like a shock." Another teacher shared a very similar experience: "I started the classes speaking in English...wow...open eyes...I mean everybody looking at each other..."

However, the teachers not only mentioned students' previous learning experience in English as one of the factors facilitating further studies in English, but also students' previous knowledge about the subject itself. For example, one EMI teacher stated that it was more challenging to work with the first-year students because they did not know special terminology, for example, mathematical proofs.

**Table 2**  
*Students' Year of Study and the Need for Linguistic Support*  
**Ranks**

|                                | <b>Year of Study</b> | <b>N</b> | <b>Mean Rank</b> |
|--------------------------------|----------------------|----------|------------------|
| ESP/EAP course<br>is necessary | First                | 35       | 71.17            |
|                                | Second               | 16       | 62.69            |
|                                | Third                | 68       | 72.38            |
|                                | Fourth               | 12       | 105.79           |
|                                | Fifth                | 4        | 100.25           |
|                                | Master's             | 12       | 65.96            |
|                                | Total                | 147      |                  |

| <b>Test Statistics<sup>a,b</sup></b> |                                    |
|--------------------------------------|------------------------------------|
|                                      | <b>ESP/EAP course is necessary</b> |
| Kruskal-Wallis H                     | 12.896                             |
| df                                   | 5                                  |
| Aymp. Sig.                           | .024                               |

a. Kruskal Wallis Test

b. Grouping variable: year of study at university

### *Students' English language proficiency and the need for language support*

In addition to the variable of the students' year of study, the variable of the students' English level was investigated in relation with the need for support. Kruskal-Wallis H test of inferential statistics was computed to determine whether the students' English level influenced the students' needs for linguistic support. As shown in Table 3, there were some differences observed at the lowest levels A1 and A2 (which might be due to the low numbers of participants); the differences in mean ranks were not statistically significant ( $p = 0.422$ , which is more than 0.05).

**Table 3***Students' English Level and the Need for Language Support*

| <b>Ranks</b>                   |                      |          |                  |
|--------------------------------|----------------------|----------|------------------|
|                                | <b>English level</b> | <b>N</b> | <b>Mean Rank</b> |
| ESP/EAP course<br>is necessary | A1                   | 1        | 129.50           |
|                                | A2                   | 4        | 86.00            |
|                                | B1                   | 32       | 70.63            |
|                                | B2                   | 69       | 76.07            |
|                                | C1                   | 37       | 70.47            |
|                                | C2                   | 3        | 47.17            |
| Total                          |                      | 146      |                  |

**Test Statistics<sup>a,b</sup>**

| <b>ESP/EAP course is necessary</b> |       |
|------------------------------------|-------|
| Kruskal-Wallis H                   | 4.948 |
| df                                 | 5     |
| Aymp. Sig.                         | .422  |

a. Kruskal Wallis Test

b. Grouping variable: English level

The qualitative findings of this research showed that the majority of teachers believed that students' English levels vary depending on the field of study. For instance, one ESP teacher reported that his/her experience of teaching a wide range of ESP courses showed that students in Tourism have a higher level of English compared to students in Architecture. However, s/he also pointed out that those cohorts of students (Tourism and Architecture) had different learning experiences in English. The students in Tourism have an ESP course every year, whereas Architecture students have only one ESP course in their whole degree, and the teacher was convinced that it had a big influence: "I can see a difference...a huge difference in the way they are approaching the course." Architecture students faced more linguistic challenges because as the teacher reported they had not had any other experience in English apart from that one ESP course in their final year.

## Discussion

Research results on EMI students' needs for linguistic support in this study are consistent with the EMI literature in international EMI contexts (Evans & Morrison, 2011; Galloway & Ruegg, 2020; Rose et al., 2019). The findings indicate a clear agreement

among students on the importance of ESP courses as linguistic support for their EMI studies. Moreover, students' favourable disposition towards ESP as a language support course can be attributed to their strong inclination to acquire and hone their English language skills, a primary factor influencing their choice of EMI subjects.

However, when comparing the findings of this study with research in the Spanish higher educational context (though such research is scarce), the results appear to be contradictory as the existing research shows that the majority of CLIL students did not perceive that language support courses were necessary (Gonzalez Ardeo, 2013; Arnó-Macia & Mancho-Barés, 2015). Such contrastive findings might be due to the teaching approach (monolingual or bilingual) used in class. In this study, the English-only approach was used. As a result, the students might not have been able to express themselves in English which led to the demand for language support. If EMI students know that they can shift to their mother tongue every time they are not sure how to express themselves in English, it means they do not have to overcome arising language challenges in EMI class. Then naturally, the students do not feel the need for linguistic support in such EMI classes where they can function perfectly knowing and applying only one strategy, that is, translation which they mastered in their secondary schools. As Arno-Macia and Mancho-Bares (2015), the researchers of the study described in the Lit Review, concluded due to the students' shared L1: "they did not have to make an effort for comprehensibility or strive for accuracy. They fell back on the L1 as a shortcut for communication" (p. 69). In such situations like this, not all the students will feel the need for support if they can use their home language instead of the language of instruction. Despite the positive impact of the translation, it also has its negative effects due to the hindrance of the development of students' communicative and intercultural competences in real world situations. Regarding UMA, it is a multilingual learning environment with international students from diverse cultural backgrounds and countries of origin. Given the fact that these competences are essential not only for EMI studies but also for preparing students as professionals of their chosen fields to function successfully in the competitive 21-century global job market, it is of the greatest importance to ensure that EMI students learn other strategies than translation to be used in English-taught courses. For this, the students will require more linguistic support because they will have to use the language (English) in different communicative situations in the EMI class.

Furthermore, the high percent of the students who wish to learn specific vocabulary shows that students understand the importance of the specialized discipline language of their field and feel the need to learn it as it is perceived as indispensable to better acquire subject content knowledge. The corresponds with some of the findings presented by Huttner (2019) in her book chapter on students' and teachers' beliefs towards disciplinary language. The data was based on five big projects she participated in. Despite the differences in beliefs among participants in all the projects, one of the beliefs that

all the projects shared was: “terminology is overtly perceived as a key feature of disciplinary language (by both student and teacher participants)” (Huttner, 2019, p. 15).

Overall, the findings regarding the language skills students need to develop are very similar to previous EMI research, which adds more validity and reliability to this study. For instance, Doiz et al. (2020) conducted the study where they investigated the students’ linguistic demands and their needs for language support in two universities in Italy and Spain. The results of the analysis of the students’ questions on the need for linguistic support showed that overall, all the students’ top priority was oral presentations and speaking skills whereas the results analysed by each group separately revealed the main difference. The cohort of Italian students expressed their wish to develop their oral presentation and speaking skills, leaving reading skills as the last skill on the list, whereas, in contrast, the cohort of Spanish students again selected reading skills as number one for learning.

Furthermore, research findings highlight the significance of students’ prior learning experience in English. In some degree programs at UMA, as some teachers mentioned during their interviews, students take their first subject in English even at the end of their university studies. For example, this is the case in Architecture. For most students, doing a course in English at university might be the first learning experience in English in their lives because most of them used to speak Spanish even in their English secondary school classes. Such students come to university without having acquired a habit of applying a foreign language to the right context, that is, the classroom. Consequently, such students who have never taken a course in English will find it more challenging than their counterparts who have already had previous learning experience in English.

The finding on students’ previous learning experience (discussed above) confirms previous EMI research, for example, in their study, Kamaşak et al. (2021) identified notable statistical differences between students who studied content in English before university with those who did not have any prior content learning experience in English. The former found the university EMI courses easier than the latter ones. Moreover, one of the conclusions made from their study is the need to support EMI students “throughout their studies in order to ensure that they are developing the language skills needed to meet the cognitive demands of increasingly difficult academic content” (Kamaşak et al., 2021, p. 13).

This finding is closely related to students’ confidence which is also supported by previously described research (Arno-Macia et al., 2020) and highlights the importance of this variable in students’ EMI studies and the need for it to be boosted. Research results also suggest that ESP courses could be one of the ways to contribute to the increase of students’ confidence and at the same time improve their English language skills. However, the findings also indicate that many questions regarding the provision of ESP courses to EMI students need to be answered, and every educational context

must be researched individually given that “each EMI context is unique in terms of linguistic demands placed on students” (Aizawa et al., 2020).

Therefore, this study along with its alignment with previous EMI research, suggests that ESP courses should be maintained as language support courses in higher education. This contradicts the tendency of the decrease of ESP courses in Spain, as described in the Introduction. Given that the number of EMI courses are increasing, and the English language is an essential tool for studying a subject in English, universities must ensure that students are provided with the appropriate and quality language support for those students who require it. Without language support, EMI students, especially those with weaker English language skills will be left to struggle, which will negatively affect their EMI studies and future career prospects.

## Conclusions

This study aimed to investigate whether EMI students require language support and how ESP courses as a language support to EMI students can contribute to the development of EMI students’ English language skills. Research findings indicate that EMI students not only believe that ESP courses are necessary, but they strongly feel that they can help improve English language skills particularly subject specific terminology and speaking skills. Quantitative findings are supported by qualitative findings. Furthermore, the findings also revealed two factors, students’ previous learning experience and confidence, that are related to students’ language skills. Thus, this suggests that the benefits of ESP language support course to EMI students could be twofold: to develop students’ English language skills and boost their confidence which consequently will facilitate students’ EMI studies. In addition, research findings suggest that not only ESP courses can contribute to EMI students’ more successful learning process in English but also the consistency of the language input throughout their university studies is crucial.

Although conducting research in one university setting might appear as a limitation since it reduces the generalizability of research results, it provides a valuable opportunity to understand the intricacies and nuances specific to that context, leading to more insightful and informative outcomes. Focusing on one context allows for a more in-depth examination of issues in EMI considering the numerous factors influencing it. This is particularly relevant as each university implements its EMI courses differently, and there are no unified EMI programmes across institutions.

To conclude, though this study is limited to a Spanish university, it could contribute to filling the existing gap in EMI literature on EMI students’ language needs and will inform stakeholders about the significance of providing linguistic support for EMI students. Consequently, it will facilitate ESP course designers in improving the

existing ESP courses. However, more research is required to identify the most beneficial language support strategies which would meet EMI students' specific needs.

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## Ispanijos aukštasis mokslas: kalbinės paramos poreikis studentams, specialybės studijų programas studijuojantiems anglų kalba

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### Santrauka

Daugelyje šalių dalykinės anglų kalbos ir akademinės anglų kalbos programų paklausa išaugo dėl sparčiai didėjančio specialybės dalykų programų anglų kalba skaičiaus aukštosiose mokyklose. Vis dėlto daugelyje Ispanijos universitetų dalykinių anglų kalbos programų buvo atsisakyta, argumentuojant tuo, kad jos gali būti pakeistos specialybės studijų programomis anglų kalba. Buvo atsižvelgta į tai, kad Ispanijos studentų anglų kalbos lygis yra vienas žemiausių Europoje, ir tai, kad specialybės dalykų programose dėmesys skiriamas dalyko turiniui, o ne pačios anglų kalbos mokymuisi. Tad iškilo grėsmė tokių studijų kokybei, ir svarbiausia, kad šios specialybės studentai buvo palikti be kalbinės paramos. Šiuo tyrimu siekiama išsiaiškinti, ar specialybės studijų programų anglų kalba studentai jaučia kalbinės paramos poreikį ir kaip dalykinės anglų kalbos programos galėtų jiems padėti patobulinti dalykinės anglų kalbos įgūdžius, reikalingus jų studijoms anglų kalba bei jų profesinėje srityje ateityje. Taikytas mišrus tyrimo metodas. Tyrimo rezultatai rodo, kad studentai ne tik mano, kad dalykinės anglų kalbos programos yra reikalingos, tačiau taip pat yra įsitikinę, kad būtent jos galėtų padėti pasitobulinti anglų kalbą, ypač specialybės dalyko terminologiją ir kalbėjimo įgūdžius. Šio tyrimo rezultatai leidžia daryti prielaidą, kad dalykinės anglų kalbos programos nauda studentams gali būti dvejopa: ugdyti studentų anglų kalbos įgūdžius ir didinti jų pasitikėjimą savimi.

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**Esminiai žodžiai:** Ispanijos aukštasis mokslas, dalykinė anglų kalba, mokymas anglų kalba, kalbinė parama studentams.

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