Students' Perceptions of the Use of English in Higher-Education Bilingual Programs

Percepciones de los estudiantes sobre el uso del inglés en los programas bilingües de educación superior

Percepções dos estudantes sobre o uso do inglês em programas bilíngues de ensino superior

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ABSTRACT. Students' voices about the use of the English language in bilingual higher-education programs have received little attention, since most research has focused on lecturers' attitudes, challenges, and needs. This exploratory study aims to gain insights into the perception of 310 students from a Spanish university context about the use of English in bilingual programs through questionnaires. Results show the students' overall satisfaction in terms of lecturers' English language proficiency and use of strategies to facilitate comprehension, as well as reluctance to be evaluated in that language, demand for further classroom interaction, and inclusion of language-related courses in bilingual-higher education curricula.

Keywords (Source: Unesco Thesaurus): Bilingual programs; higher education; students' voices; English-medium instruction; English language use.

RESUMEN. Las voces de los estudiantes sobre el uso del inglés en los programas bilingües de educación superior no han recibido mucha atención, ya que la mayoría de las investigaciones se han centrado en las actitudes, desafíos y necesidades de los profesores. Este estudio exploratorio pretende conocer la percepción de 310 estudiantes de un contexto universitario español sobre el uso del inglés en programas bilingües a través de cuestionarios. Los resultados muestran la satisfacción general de los estudiantes en cuanto al dominio del idioma inglés de del profesorado y el uso de estrategias para facilitar la comprensión, así como la reticencia a ser evaluados en ese idioma, la demanda de una mayor interacción en el aula, y la inclusión de cursos relacionados con el idioma en el currículo de educación superior bilingüe.

Palabras Clave (Fuente: Unesco Thesaurus): Programas bilingües; educación superior; voces de los estudiantes; inglés como medio de instrucción; uso del idioma inglés.

RESUMO. As vozes dos estudantes sobre o uso do inglês em programas bilíngues de ensino superior não receberam muita atenção, pois a maioria das pesquisas se concentrou nas atitudes, desafios e necessidades dos professores. Este estudo exploratório tem como objetivo conhecer a percepção de 310 estudantes de um contexto universitário espanhol sobre o uso do inglês em programas bilíngues por meio de questionários. Os resultados mostram a satisfação geral em relação ao domínio do inglês dos cursos e a utilização de estratégias para facilitar a compreensão, bem como a relutância em ser avaliado nessa língua e a demanda por maior interação em sala de aula, e a inclusão de cursos relacionados ao idioma no currículo do ensino superior bilíngue.

Palavras-chave (Fonte: Thesaurus da Unesco): Programas bilíngues; educação superior; vozes dos estudantes; inglês como meio de instrução; uso do inglês.

Introduction

The implementation of bilingual education programs in Europe and other regions in the world in the last two decades has instigated a high number of studies related to the impact of using non-native languages as a medium of instruction. This has triggered extensive collection of data from different educational stages. The case of tertiary education in Spain is particular, since Spanish higher-education (HE) institutions are normally characterized by the independent design of teaching plans and methodologies under the umbrella provided through general requirements set up by the head administrations, normally at country or regional level (Fortanet, 2013).

Many reasons have sustained the proliferation of bilingual degrees and courses in Spanish universities as in the rest of Europe in response to the need to develop international curricula, which constitute a form of promoting internationalization at home as an alternative to spending time abroad (Nilsson, 2003). Among the reasons supporting international curricula in HE, we emphasize the following (Costa, 2016; Dafouz & Smit, 2020): competitiveness to attract and retain more students, cooperation and strategic partnerships with other HE institutions, need to promote mobility and employability in the realm of globalization and internationalization, or demand of lifelong learning programs. As a result of the spread of bilingual programs in tertiary education, different aspects related to their implementation have been studied with the purpose of providing insights into the challenges and potentials of this educational phenomenon (Dafouz, 2014).

In Spain, most of the studies that evaluate the effect of bilingual programs have been conducted in compulsory stages, with research on HE being increasingly relevant but still limited. The particular context of tertiary education in Spain, characterized by a strong autonomy, has given rise to multiple mixed bottom-up and top-down models for the implementation of bilingual plans in the last years, generally in the form of English-medium instruction (EMI) courses. The evaluation of bilingual programs has been considered a priority to analyze their effectiveness (Wolff, 2005). In this respect, some research (Aguilar, 2017; Aguilar & Rodríguez, 2012; Airey, 2012; Ball & Lindsay, 2013; Dafouz,

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2014; Tatzl, 2011) has opened paths considering university lecturers and students' perceptions of their bilingual education experience, as well as their attitudes, beliefs, and cognition.

Within the body of research into perceptions in bilingual HE, it is noteworthy that most studies have been centered on lecturers' attitudes, beliefs and needs, especially for teacher training purposes (Aguilar, 2017; Ball & Lindsay, 2013; Sánchez-Pérez & Salaberri-Ramiro, 2017). However, research on students' views is rather scarcer (Lasagabaster et al., 2018), being considered as "the forgotten voices" in HE bilingual research (Karakas, 2017, p. 1). Only a few studies focusing on students' motivations to enroll in bilingual courses (Doiz & Sierra, 2013; Kamasak et al., 2021; Salaberri-Ramiro & Sánchez-Pérez, 2018) or on perceptions about language and content-related challenges (Lasagabaster et al., 2018) are currently found in the literature about bilingual education at tertiary level. This study tries to fill an existing research gap by exploring the perceptions that HE students participating in bilingual programs in a Spanish university have on the use of the English language in an attempt to gain further insights into the appropriateness of the use of this language for teaching and learning purposes at tertiary level.

Bilingual education at tertiary level

The term *bilingual education* was firstly introduced by the UNESCO in 1999. It was defined as the "education that aims to promote bilingual (or multilingual) competence by using both (or all) languages as media of instruction for significant proportions of the academic curriculum" (Genesee, 2004, p. 548). Throughout the last decades, the different bilingual educational models have arisen, Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) being one of the most popular ones in Europe, defined as the "dual-focused educational approach in which an additional language is used for the learning and teaching of both content and language" (Coyle et al., 2010, p. 1). While this approach was initially used regardless of the educational level, today it is more associated with compulsory educational stages, whereas EMI is the most widespread label to indicate bilingual and multilingual education at tertiary level (Macaro, 2018). However, there are some other models found

in the literature on bilingual education at university level, such as Integrating Content and Language in Higher Education (ICLHE) (Valcke & Wilkinson, 2017; Wilkinson & Zegers, 2007). While CLIL and ICLHE refer explicitly in their acronyms to the integration of both content and language, in EMI there is a major focus on academic and disciplinary content learning, with English language learning or support being rarely considered. EMI is the model that prevails in most Spanish higher-education settings and in the context of this study. The lack of attention to the language use in bilingual educational contexts implementing EMI programs has triggered numerous concerns about the effects that the use of English by non-native speakers have on the academic accomplishment of the students participating in such programs (Dafouz & Smit, 2020; Macaro, 2018). This study addresses this issue by exploring the perceptions about the use of English of more than 300 students participating in bilingual programs in a Spanish university context.

Previous research on lecturers and students' perceptions of the use of English in higher education bilingual programs

Research into lecturers and students' perception about the use of English in bilingual programs in HE is still scarce and, quite frequently, it pays more attention to lecturers' attitudes, beliefs and perceptions than to students' impressions. Initial literature on HE bilingual programs has reported lecturers' insufficient English language skills and students' problems to follow course contents, a circumstance fed by unsatisfactory language proficiency of both lecturers and students, low budget and other institutional and administrative problems (Smith, 2004). The effect of the shift to bilingual education on lecturers' experiences and students' perceptions was examined by Yusof et al. (2004), concluding that both have different views. While lecturers were satisfied and did not find major concerns, more than 40% of the students perceived the lecturers' ability to communicate in English as a handicap to provide instructions on the course orientation and structure, to deliver the lecture content and to interact outside formal lectures. In a similar vein, Sercu (2004) used interviews and lecture observation to compare lecturers' and students' language skills, perceptions and attitudes when participating in bilingual programs at university. Both groups seemed to

support the experience considering that English language skills would improve by participating in these programs. However, they also argued that the program should be applied in graduate courses, as teaching in another language may lead to an increase in the study and teaching load, together with important losses in achievement in subject contents and the quality of teaching and learning. In a later study conducted by Tatzl (2011), the attitudes and experiences of lecturers and students revealed that both were in favor of English-medium instruction, but they also informed about different levels of students' previous knowledge, decrease in the amount of content that can be taught and student workload. In the Spanish context, Aguilar and Rodríguez (2012) collected data from 17 lecturers, and 87 students following a CLIL course in a School of Engineering at a Spanish university, who participated in 15-week courses. Lecturers were asked about their motivation, perceived quality of teaching, attitudes towards teacher training and problems or complaints. Findings showed that their level of motivation was high because they had increased their English fluency and confidence and, in relation to teacher training, most of them were reluctant to receive training in CLIL methodology. They also expressed that students' performance and content had not decreased and manifested that they had assessed content but not language, in line with results obtained in other studies (Airey, 2012; Dafouz, 2014; Doiz et al., 2013). Some complaints were also reported, mainly about the lack of support and resources. On the other hand, nearly 75% of the students considered it an enriching experience and valued positively the use of technical specialized vocabulary, followed by listening and speaking, but 59% said that they had not learned any English. In later research, Aguilar and Muñoz (2013) found that low proficiency students had gains in listening and grammar skills and, when describing negative aspects, they referred to the lecturers' low proficiency level and slow delivery rate, which refutes the lecturers' perceptions.

The research literature about students' perceptions of the use of English in bilingual programs in HE is far more limited. Among the few studies conducted addressing learners' views, we can find the preliminary study by Muñoz (2001), who surveyed students at a Spanish university regarding content teaching through a foreign language. Students' perceptions reported gains in vocabulary, pronunciation,

receptive skills, writing and confidence in the use of the L2, but they did not perceive improvements in speaking skills and grammar. Later studies include the one by Tsuchiya and Pérez-Murillo (2015) who compared language policies and students' perceptions of CLIL in two universities — one in Japan and the other one in Spain — through a questionnaire. Results show a positive view in both universities, addressing concerns like insufficient English language skills to understand subject contents and the danger of lack of subject knowledge in L1. Studer (2015) presents results obtained from undergraduate students enrolled in a bilingual degree program at a university in Switzerland, revealing students' interpretative repertoires surrounding their positive and negative perceptions of their lecturers lecturing in English as a medium of instruction. Findings show that students connected positive feelings about the program with lecturers' communicative and didactic skills, and they expressed their negative experience, focusing on the low competence and performance of lecturers in English. As perceived by the students, positive classroom experiences may compensate the lack of lecturers' language proficiency. In a more recent study, Lasagabaster et al. (2018) analyzed the perceptions of undergraduate students participating in EMI programs in two Spanish universities about the role of the EMI lecturer as language teacher, collaboration between content and language specialists in EMI teaching, language assessment, and L1 use. Students manifested that content teachers should not address language issues in EMI lessons, as it is not their role, although they showed a positive attitude towards collaboration between content and language specialists. Additionally, they agreed that their L1 should be given limited space in EMI classrooms, and there was no consensus as to whether language should be considered for assessment in EMI.

Research questions

This study aims to analyze higher education students' perception of the use of the English language when participating in bilingual programs in a Spanish university context, an issue that remains insufficiently explored in bilingual higher education research (Lasagabaster et al., 2018). For this purpose, the following research questions are addressed:

1. What are the students' perceptions about the amount of English language use in the bilingual programs in terms of perceived percentage of course taught in English, provision of resources, materials, and assessment in English?
2. What are the students' perceptions about the use of the English language in the bilingual courses? This question in divided into four sub-questions: 2a) How do students perceive teachers' English language proficiency in terms of accuracy and fluency?; 2b) How do students perceive the strategies used by the teachers to facilitate lecture comprehension in English?; 2c) Do students perceive any English language improvement by attending bilingual programs?; and 2d) Do they consider that they need additional English language support?

Methodology

Context and participants

The data for this study were collected from students who had been participating in bilingual programs at the University of Almería (Spain) for two academic years as part of the university internationalization plan. Initially, the university started a Plurilingualism Promotion Plan, approved by the Council of Government of the university, that was open to teaching through any foreign language and, after a few years of implementation, English became the dominant language. Different courses that are part of the curriculum to obtain undergraduate and Master's degrees were offered in English, and the students taking part in the bilingual programs who achieved half of the total number of credits taught in English would obtain a bilingual mention in their final certificate. All the lecturers involved in the plan had a minimum B2 language level certified according to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) and quite a few of them had a C1. They had attended a 30-hour seminar on CLIL methodology in tertiary education.

A total number (*N*) of 310 students participated in this study. They were distributed as follows: 285 were enrolled in undergraduate

courses and 25 were enrolled in master's degree courses that involved 35 lecturers teaching 28 courses in 17 different degrees. The courses belonged to Schools of Health Sciences, Experimental Sciences, Engineering, Business Administration, Humanities, Education Sciences, and Psychology. Table 1 shows the distribution of participants per school. These proportions and profiles correspond to the number of subjects offered in English in each School.

Table 1. Number of participants per school

School	N
Psychology	115
Business Administration	113
Education	31
Humanities	29
Health Sciences	19
Experimental Sciences	3

Source: Own elaboration.

Instruments for data gathering

Data were gathered through an anonymous questionnaire sent to the students individually by email using the online platform "Limesurvey". The distribution of the questionnaire was made in compliance with the regulations of the University of Almería in terms of ethical and data protection requirements for research data gathering.

The questionnaire was designed by the authors of this paper along with the experts from the Vice-Rectorate of Internationalization and the Quality Department of the University of Almería and was used to evaluate the implementation and development of the Plurilingualism Promotion Plan. It contained 10 closed-ended and open-ended questions. The former were answered through a Likert-style scale ranked in order of strength: 1 (strongly disagree), 2 (disagree), 3 (neither agree nor disagree), 4 (agree), 5 (strongly agree). An option for "I don't know/No opinion" was added, as well as an open-ended option below each item for the students to narrate and justify their answers.

The first section of the questionnaire was meant to respond to Research Question 1 (RQ1). It included one question about the perceived

amount of English language use in the bilingual courses and five statements about the provision of resources, materials and assessment in that language (see Appendix for a detailed account of the items included in the questionnaire).

The second part of the questionnaire was aimed at responding to Research Question 2 (RQ2) and Sub-Questions 2a, 2b, 2c, 2d. It included four statements about how students perceive lecturers' English language proficiency, how students perceive the strategies used by the teachers to facilitate lecture comprehension in English, whether students perceive English language improvement by participating in bilingual programs at university, and whether they consider they would like to receive English language support.

The questionnaire was written and responded in Spanish, the L1 of most of the surveyed students. Answers were eventually translated into English verbatim for publication purposes.

A panel of four experts from the university, including the authors and two lecturers participating in the Plurilingualism Promotion plan, was chosen to do a pre-evaluation of the questionnaire in order to identify problems to understand the instructions and content of the items and to identify missing relevant fields. The open-ended question related to students' perceptions was added as a result of their suggestions to collect qualitative data. A modified version of the initial questionnaire was generated and piloted with thirty students selected randomly for a second evaluation, during which they could interact with the researchers to clarify the necessary aspects. In the course of that interaction with the students, some wording was tuned and adjusted to enhance comprehension. Once the questionnaire was piloted, it was revised and modified, and the final version was distributed to the whole sample. The received data were exported to an Excel file for a detailed analysis of items, calculating the number of responses (N), the arithmetic mean and standard deviation. To check for the internal consistency of the items included in the questionnaire, a Cronbach's alpha value was calculated. A high coefficient level was obtained ($\alpha = .82$), which confirms that the questionnaire was reliable.

The data collected were used to generate a report with the global punctuation, plus specific reports addressed to different audiences including every undergraduate and postgraduate degree, each school, and lecturer.

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Procedure

The procedure of analysis follows an exploratory mixed-methods approach. Quantitative data were obtained through the responses to the closed-ended Likert-based questions of the questionnaire, and qualitative data were analyzed from the open-ended responses.

The quantitative analysis considered, for each closed-ended response, the number of participants (*N*), the mean (*x̲*) and standard deviation (*SD*), a measure that gives information about the amount of dispersion or variation of a set of data— that is, it quantifies how the data are distributed about the mean value. Comments supporting the responses were submitted to qualitative analysis and managed with MAXQDA-10 software to identify extracts of students' opinions illustrating the results after coding and matching them to the items. The percentage of use of English as perceived by the students was also analyzed.

Findings

The findings are presented following the order of the research questions (RQ1 and RQ2). For each research question, the quantitative data obtained in the study are presented first in the form of figures or tables, followed by the qualitative data based on students' narratives supporting their responses.

Perceived amount of English language exposure

The first research question (RQ1) refers to the students' perceptions about the amount of English language use in their bilingual course in terms of perceived percentage of the course taught in English, provision of resources, materials and assessment in that language. Regarding the students' perception (Table 2), there is a relevant number of students (189) who think that between 50% and 100% of the class is taught in English, while 121 students perceive that 25% of the class, or less, is taught in the foreign language.

Table 2. Students' responses about the perceived percentage
of the course taught in English

N	Perceived % of English language use in bilingual courses
61	100%
81	75%
47	50%
44	25%
77	< 25%

Source: Own elaboration.

As for the students' perceptions of the provision of resources materials in English (Table 3), they are quite homogeneous in most items. The highest scores refer to items 3 and 4, meaning that students perceive that classroom materials provided by the lecturers in bilingual courses are mostly available in English, especially course bibliography and information resources. The significant lowest score corresponds to item 5, which means that students perceive that tutorial sessions are mainly delivered in Spanish.

Table 3. Global results of the students' perceptions about the amount
of English language use in bilingual courses

Items (scale: 1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree) (N = 310)	$\underline{x}$	SD
2. The course program syllabus is available in English.	3.47	1.68
3. The materials provided by the lecturer in face-to-face and online lessons are available in English.	3.68	1.42
4. Bibliography and other sources of information in English have been recommended.	3.83	1.33
5. Tutorial sessions are carried out in English.	2.30	1.47
6. Course assessment is done in English.	3.46	1.57

Note: $\underline{x}$ = mean; SD = standard deviation
Source: Own elaboration.

After obtaining the global score, a second quantitative analysis was done because some differences were observed between students pursuing varied university qualifications (Master's degree and undergraduate

students). Before the total integration in the European Higher Education Area (EHEA), a wide variety of higher education degrees coexisted in Spain. These include Diploma (3-year degree), Bachelor (4-year degree), Engineering (5-year degree), Undergraduate degree (4-year degree / 240 ECTS). Due to the process of gradual replacement of the former structure, started in 2009, by the system available when gathering the data for the present study, there were students following studies within different systems. This specification is shown in Table 2. Therefore, results will be presented both in general and according to this subsequent and more detailed analysis (Table 4).

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Table 4. Students' perceptions of amount of English language use in bilingual courses according to different university levels

Items (scale: 1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree)	DIP $\underline{x}$ (N = 24)	BA $\underline{x}$ (N = 67)	ENG $\underline{x}$ (N = 20)	UD $\underline{x}$ (N = 174)	MA $\underline{x}$ (N = 25)
2. The course program /syllabus is available in English.	1.88	3.64	4.37	3.36	4.12
3. The materials provided by the lecturer in face-to-face and online lessons are available in English.	2.33	3.59	4.21	3.74	4.28
4. Bibliography and other sources of information in English have been recommended.	3.20	4.10	4.00	3.72	4.20
5. Tutorial sessions are carried out in English.	2.16	2.38	3.28	1.98	3.21
6. Course assessment is done in English.	2.50	3.22	3.53	3.58	3.91

Note: $\underline{x}$ = mean; DIP = Diploma; BA = Bachelor's degree; ENG = Engineering; UD = Undergraduate degree; MA = Master's degree

Source: Own elaboration.

The first question asked whether or not the course program or syllabus was in English. Here, an important difference can be found in the

means between students enrolled in ENG (4.37) and MA (4.12) when compared to the rest, which do not go over 3.64. Even though lecturers had to write the syllabus in English as part of the plan, it appears that some of them kept it in Spanish, especially in the case of DIP, where the mean is very low (1.88). Because the lecturers and administrators were provided with the results of the study, the following academic year all the syllabuses were completed in English and that was supervised by the coordinators of the plan. As for the qualitative data, students did not write any opinions in the open-ended option with respect to this item to support their answers.

The means of replies to Question 3 regarding the use of English in the material provided by the lecturer in-person and virtual classes was also very high in all groups (3.68), which attaches the third-best result to this item in the overall analysis (Table 1). MA students scored this item as the highest (4.28). The perception that students have is that lecturers use varied teaching material (videos, ICT resources, class notes, specific tasks for courses such as lab reports, case studies, etc.) in the foreign language as they express in the open question: "It's the first time that we have been presented a case study in business administration in English. This helps for the real world" (Student No. 36). They appreciate conciseness and focus on key and clear aspects when new information is introduced, as student No. 112 claims: "I value positively when teachers use short sentences, key ideas and diagrams in PowerPoint presentations of new material in English."

As for Question 4, related to the use of bibliography and other sources of information in English, most responses were very positive in all groups (3.83). Students appreciate the increase in the amount of specialized bibliography available in English at the library. In the case of MA students, the mean is notably high (4.20), but also in the rest of the groups, which gives to this issue the highest total mean. It is relevant, here, to mention the budget provided by the institution to be invested in bibliographical resources in the foreign language, a fact that has been implemented each academic year and has provided the library with a good number of books and journals in English. This overall positive perception of the use of bibliography in English can be appreciated in some students' comments, such as: "A good bibliography in English helps to understand, in depth, ideas introduced by lecturers in the classroom

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through PowerPoint" (Student, No. 24), or "Reading in English helps to understand and review concepts" (Student No. 113).

In Question 5, students were asked about tutorials in English, and this item showed the lowest global mean (2.30). When analyzing the results in the different groups, we also find that the vast majority attached the lowest score to tutorials — see, for example, MA students (3.21), UD (1.98), and BA (2.38). In DIP (2.16) and ENG (3.28), this was the second-lowest score. Students express their opinion on the use of tutorials as an activity limited to solving students' individual problems: "We go to tutorials in the timetable scheduled by lecturers. We normally go to ask about exams or questions, and we speak in Spanish because it's not teaching time" (Student No. 226).

The sixth and last item in this section, referring to whether the assessment was done in the foreign language or not, scored relatively high (3.46), although relevant differences are found among the groups. MA students show the highest mean (3.91) of all groups, while this is very low (2.20) in the DIP group. The other groups have got similar means: BA (3.22), ENG (3.53), and UD (3.58). The results show that this essential activity is mainly developed in English except, for the Diploma students who seem to have more problems when facing the assessment in English, so lecturers made part of it in their L1, as student No. 98 indicates: "Only 15% of the questions in the final exam should be in English". They also suggest that only part of the assessment should be done in English: "The percentage of assessment in English should correspond to the percentage of the course taught in English" (Student No. 142). Sometimes they think that an adaptation of the types of questions in exams would help them answer: "I would prefer exams with multiple-choice questions rather than exams with questions that demand a lot of writing" (Student No. 176). There are many students who feel that assessment is not continuous and is more based on exams: "Assessment should be really continuous, incorporating class work, discussion groups, debates, etc. Exams make me feel nervous" (Student No. 241).

Perceptions of English language use

The second research question (RQ2) refers to the students' perceptions of the use of the English language in their bilingual courses. This question was divided into four sub-questions concerning how students perceived their lecturers' accuracy and fluency in the use of English, the strategies used by the lecturers to facilitate lecture comprehension in English, whether they perceived any English language improvement by attending bilingual courses, and whether they considered they needed additional English language support. The results of the quantitative analysis of the responses to the items concerning these questions are shown in Table 5 (global results) and Table 6 (results according to different university levels).

Table 5. Global results of the students' perceptions about
the use of the English language in bilingual courses

Items (scale: 1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree) (N = 310)	$\underline{x}$	SD
1. I consider appropriate the course lecturer's English language level.	3.79	1.33
2. The lecturer uses strategies in English to make the information comprehensible to the students when he/she observes that they have difficulties.	3.49	1.51
3. Attending courses in English has contributed to an improvement in my English language use.	3.23	1.55
4. I would like to receive specific English language training related to the course contents.	3.40	1.51

Note: $\underline{x}$ = mean; *SD* = standard deviation

Source: Own elaboration.

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Table 6. Students' perceptions of the use of the English language in the bilingual courses at different university levels

Items (scale: 1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree)	DIP $\underline{x}$ (N = 24)	BA $\underline{x}$ (N = 67)	ENG $\underline{x}$ (N = 20)	UD $\underline{x}$ (N = 174)	MA $\underline{x}$ (N = 25)
1. I consider appropriate the course lecturer's English language level.	3.75	4.08	3.94	3.68	3.72
2. The lecturer uses strategies in English to make the information comprehensible to the students when he/she observes that they have difficulties.	2.44	3.77	4.00	3.45	3.50
3. Attending courses in English has contributed to an improvement in my English language use.	2.29	3.29	3.58	3.21	3.52
4. I would like to receive specific English language training related to the course contents.	3.25	3.41	3.16	3.39	3.76

Note: $\underline{x}$ = mean; DIP = Diploma; BA = Bachelor's degree; ENG = Engineering; UD = Undergraduate degree; MA = Master's degree
Source: Own elaboration.

Regarding students' perception about lecturers' English language level, they show a global high score (3.79) (Table 5) but not equally found among the different university levels (Table 6). MA students have a questioning attitude towards the lecturers' use of English, which is expressed through their comments: "Teachers can help to increase the students' level of English, but they can also contribute to lower it down when they do not interact with the class orally and just read slides or notes, sometimes with errors" (Student No. 153). Other students at this level focus on the strict use lecturers make of formal English and demand use of more colloquial language, as student No. 187 pinpoints: "More colloquial expressions could be used by teachers and not just make use of correct formal language." Some students in undergraduate courses tend to appraise positively the lecturers' use of English, rein-

forcing the idea that it can be a springboard to achieve a B1 level, which is required for undergraduate students to complete their degrees in most Spanish universities, according to educational regulations: "To achieve a B1 level is a nightmare for many students who would rather prefer to choose bilingual subjects leading to the achievement of that level" (Student No. 127).

In item 8, the students were asked about the strategies used in English by lecturers to make the information comprehensible when they observed that students had difficulties. The global mean is 3.49, and it goes over the mean in the group of BA (3.77), ENG (4.00), and MA (3.50). Different teaching strategies are signaled by the students as supportive to help them understand lessons better, e.g.: "The teacher has been able to make the course fun and comprehensible to everybody, adapting the language when necessary" (Student No. 123). More concrete strategies have been highlighted in relation to types of questions, as Student No. 266 points out: "The teacher gave us opportunities to answer questions that we did not understand at the beginning, giving alternatives to choose from or asking as to say just yes or no when the question was very difficult". The role of comprehension checks as a type of question has also been observed by students: "I learn more when the teacher checks that we are following the explanation" (Student No. 106). Repetition has also been identified as a strategy that helps them understand better: "The difference with teaching through the L1 is that she repeats using the same or other words when we don't understand" (Student No. 149).

As for item 9 regarding students' perception of how attending courses in English had contributed to their improvement in their language proficiency level, the global mean is 3.23, which makes it the second-lowest score in the questionnaire after the question about tutorials in the first section. When comparing data obtained from the different groups, one can observe that MA (3.52), ENG (3.21) and UD (3.21) students also attached the second-lowest score to this item expressing opinions about the few opportunities they have perceived as valuable to improve their level of English. For example, "The fact that teachers focus on specific words and concepts does not help to improve my general English. In fact, I think I have lowered down my level" (Student No. 71). The other two groups including DIP (2.29) and BA (3.29) students

recognize more opportunities to improve their level of language use when compared to other items, as Student No. 93 claims: "Because we do not have the subject of English in our studies, this is a good opportunity to refresh and improve our level of English." This may be due to the fact that the first three groups mentioned above normally have a higher language proficiency level, especially MA students who need to have a certified B1 level after finishing their undergraduate courses to obtain the final qualification. On the other hand, DIP students had accessed their studies with a lower mark in the university entrance examination, and BA students belong to the extinguishing study plans in which they did not have to achieve a set level of English to get a qualification.

Finally, the replies to item 10 were related to the students' desire to receive added specific language training connected to the course contents, that is, to be offered English for Academic or Specific Purposes (EAP/ESP) courses to support their use of the foreign language in parallel with their immersion in courses taught in English. The global mean of answers is 3.40, which is quite high and meaningful if we examine the results from the different groups and the free opinions given by the students. The highest mean is provided by MA students (3.76) when compared to the rest of the groups (UD (3.39), ENG (3.16), BA (3.41) and DIP (3.25) students). In fact, qualitative comments in the different groups claim for the existence of English as a subject in their studies. For example, "English should be a subject from the first academic year with a focus on vocabulary and specific terms that we will need to use in future professions" (Student No. 154). This is particularly relevant in the context of the University of Almeria which, like many other Spanish universities, does not include English as a subject in many study plans (Law, Engineering, Health, etc.). Some students even add that English should be compulsory throughout their studies in HE: "I think we need to have the subject of English as mandatory in our studies because English taught courses are not enough" (Student No. 129). Some others underscore their attrition in English when they do not have English as a subject, e.g., "We learn more specific English, sometimes for a few subjects, but we forget our knowledge of general English because we do not practise it" (Student No. 206). The general feeling is that they lose their general communicative skills in English progressively, even though they improve their formal specific English language skills.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to gain insights into students' perception of the use of English in bilingual programs in a Spanish university context. Regarding their impression about the amount of English language use in class, more than 60% of the surveyed students consider that more than half of the time is taught in English, whereas nearly 40% perceive that approximately a quarter of the time is taught in this language. Most of them consider, overall, that classroom materials provided by the lecturers in bilingual courses are mostly available in English, especially course bibliography and information resources, as occurred initially in most Spanish bilingual HE settings. These findings reinforce the assumption of the diverse nature of bilingual education at tertiary level, which requires further and in-depth analyses to ascertain the multiple and varied casuistries that may occur in these contexts, even within the same setting or institution (Dafouz & Smit, 2020). In contrast to these differentiated results, our findings show that, according to students' perception, in general, lecturers did not make extensive and systematic use of tutorials in the foreign language. Students also had the perception that tutorials were designed to solve doubts or problems of those classmates who voluntarily went to talk to lecturers in the fixed tutorial timetable, rather than to add further practice. Probably a different organization of tutorials to carry out actions in English to interweave both language and content would be beneficial to overcome students' challenges and would provide more benefits, as they are based on the performance of planned tasks in tutorial groups like reading graphs and charts, defining key concepts and paragraph writing (Hernández-Nanclares & Jiménez-Muñoz, 2017).

The issue of assessment in bilingual programs has proved to be controversial for the students. Lecturers may try to assess in English, but sometimes there is a negative reaction on the part of the students because they perceive that assessment is not formative and continuous in many cases, and exams have an important effect on their final academic results (Lasagabaster et al., 2018). Most students are afraid of achieving lower marks when they do summative assessment through exams in English, and they claim for continuous

assessment, which also shows the lack of formative assessment in the context under analysis. The words from Fortanet (2013) on this matter are clarifying, arguing for the need for "some degree of accommodation to the learners' needs, especially in (…) [the] type of assignments and assessment procedures" (p. 35). Our findings support previous research carried out in the Spanish context, which highlights the need to consider continuous and formative assessment with a focus on the students' overall performance and not just summative assessment based mainly on subject contents (Ball & Lindsay, 2013; Dafouz, 2014).

Regarding lecturers' the English language level, students perceived, overall, that most had an adequate language proficiency level, although some manifested explicitly the lack of interaction with students and an excessive focus on academic language use, especially at postgraduate level, which concurs with other studies where students demand more opportunities to interact with lecturers in English to promote basic interpersonal communicative skills (Cummins, 2008) in bilingual HE lessons (Doiz et al., 2019).

As for students' perceptions of the strategies that teachers use in classroom interaction, they are aware of the importance of the lecturer's discourse to co-construct meanings, be it in the form of questions, comprehension checks, repetition, etc. These results strengthen Dafouz and Sánchez's (2013) claims about the need for lecturers to receive training on attention to their own discourse in the classroom in order to identify the language that can be used to support student learning, for example, repetition, paraphrasing, slow delivery, use of synonyms (Doiz et al., 2013), etc.

Regarding students' perceptions about the opportunities that bilingual courses offer to improve their English language use, it was found that those with a higher level of proficiency seem to have higher expectations to improve their English language use, while students with a lower level find more language benefits in English taught courses. This echoes results from other studies (Aguilar & Muñoz, 2013; Aguilar & Rodríguez, 2012), which report that elementary level students benefit more from participating in bilingual courses in terms of language development, especially in listening comprehension and grammar skills.

As for the students' perceived need to receive English language training and support together with bilingual courses, a high number of students have the impression that attending a few isolated language courses would not help them to maintain their initial command of the foreign language. Considering that English is not part of the study plans as a course subject in most Spanish universities, except for Philology and Business studies, among others, students claim for the inclusion of English as a subject in their studies because they have the perception of going through an attrition process (Smith, 2004). Higher-education institutions should, therefore, reconsider the possibility to include specific language-related courses to complement bilingual education programs at tertiary level to foster students' academic development, not only in terms of disciplinary content acquisition, but to maintain and reinforce their previous English language knowledge (Airey, 2012, 2020; Lyster, 2017).

Conclusion

This study has filled an existing research gap by analyzing HE students' perceptions about the use of English in bilingual programs in a Spanish university context, an issue still underexplored in bilingual higher-education research. Findings show that bilingual lessons are not necessarily taught completely in the target language, but bibliography and resources are frequently provided in English. The majority of the students showed reluctance towards being examined in the foreign language, arguing for continuous and formative assessment centered on students' course overall performance.

Most surveyed participants reported an adequate perceived English language proficiency on the part of their lecturers but demanded further classroom interaction and focus on social communicative practices, although they acknowledge the strategies used by the lecturers to facilitate comprehension in the foreign language. Finally, as regards the students' improvement of their command of English by participating in bilingual courses, there are marked differences between higher and lower proficiency students, the latter being those who observed

higher benefits in their English language development. Most also advocate for the inclusion of English language-related courses to avoid a language attrition.

From a pedagogical perspective, this study suggests that bilingual education at tertiary level should be developed in the form of ICLHE-oriented dynamics, where the target language gains focus in bilingual course syllabi and students receive the necessary language support. This new orientation of bilingual education at tertiary level should be accompanied by specific teacher educational programs focused on the integration of content and language in HE and possible collaboration or team teaching between content and language experts.

While the findings of this study provide valuable insights into students' voices about the use of English in bilingual programs at tertiary level, it should be acknowledged that, despite the significant number of participants of this study, it is focused only on a particular context, which prevents from the generalization of these results due to the high specificity of bilingual university contexts. Additionally, the analysis of the data is based upon self-reported questionnaires, which may lead to imprecise answers because of possible under- or overestimation derived from unintentionally provisions of socially desirable responses. Therefore, further studies involving different bilingual university contexts and research instruments such as interviews, focus or discussion groups would be desirable to obtain more precise views on the students' perceptions. The combination of results of the current study and data collected from the above suggested research proposals could help stakeholders and researchers on bilingual education at tertiary level understand how students perceive the challenging endeavor of learning disciplinary content in an additional language in an increasingly international bilingual higher education scenario.

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APPENDIX

Question 1. What percentage (%) of the lesson in taught English?						
Questions 2 - 10	1	2	3	4	5	N/A
2. The course program / syllabus is available in English. Comments: _____ _____ _____ _____						
3. The materials provided by the lecturer in face-to-face and online lessons have been facilitated in English. Comments: _____ _____ _____ _____						
4. Bibliography and other sources of information in English have been recommended. Comments: _____ _____ _____ _____						
5. Tutorials are carried out in English. Comments: _____ _____ _____ _____						
6. Course assessment is done in English, according to the percentage of the course taught in that language. Comments: _____ _____ _____ _____						

Question 1. What percentage (%) of the lesson in taught English?						
Questions 2 - 10	1	2	3	4	5	N/A
7. I consider appropriate the course lecturer's English language level. Comments: _____ _____ _____ _____						
8. The lecturer uses strategies in English to make the information comprehensible to the students when he/she observes that they have difficulties. Comments: _____ _____ _____ _____						
9. Attending courses in English has contributed to an improvement in my English language use. Comments: _____ _____ _____ _____						
10. I would like to receive specific English language training related to the course contents. Comments: _____ _____ _____ _____						