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Self-perceived proficiency in English of International
Students in Université Catholique de Louvain:
Attitudes towards English, Problems and Strategies.

MA Dissertation of
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Master in Linguistics
Linguistics and its Applications for a Multilingual Society
Double Degree Programme

Academic Year 2017 – 2018
May 2018

Acknowledgements

My heartfelt thanks go to all the people who helped me with the completion of this dissertation.

First and foremost, I would like to thank my main supervisor, Philippe Hambye for his time, guidance and useful feedback on this project. Also, a special thanks to my second supervisor from the University of Oslo, Agnieszka Pysz, for her support.

A special thanks also goes to the participants of this study who were more than willing to share their views during this small-scale study.

I wish to express my gratitude to my parents and my siblings for always believing in me. Also, to Artemis and Nefeli, my two cute nieces for always asking me if I want ice-cream while writing.

Finally, I would like to thank from the bottom of my heart the greatest friend one can have, Charoula, for truly being next to me every single day, supporting me and ignoring all my anxiety and bad mood.

Abstract

The central objective of this master's thesis is to explore the self-perceived proficiency in English of 20 graduate students in Université Catholique de Louvain and their opinions about the varieties of English used in higher education today. In the midst of the development of English as a Lingua Franca, academia tends to resist its adoption by still favoring the Standard use of English in its circles. This model, as the only one authorized as conventional, does not represent the actual practices noted by the students; as they refer to a distance between what is accepted and expected from them in the use of English and the varieties they actually use. This idea is also depicted through the second part of our investigation, regarding the problems the students face in their use of English -in relation to the norm of the standard variety- and the strategies they employ to deal with them. This study aims at investigating the aforementioned topic by using qualitative multimethods, i.e. interviews and student notes, in order to explore the views of the participants in depth.

KEYWORDS: proficiency, English, varieties in English, higher education, English-medium instruction, linguistic problems, language learning strategies.

Table of contents

Abstract	4
Introduction.....	9
List of abbreviation.....	8
Introduction.....	9
CHAPTER 1 Literature Review.....	11
1.1. Proficiency of MA students.....	11
1.1.1. Definition	11
1.1.2. Studies on L2 proficiency and important questions to be asked.....	12
1.1.3. Tests used to assess proficiency in English and the Common European Framework of Reference.....	14
1.2. English in the world.....	15
1.2.1. Previous research on ELF and Standard use of English.....	18
1.2.2. Variety used in the university.....	19
1.2.3. The model "in-between"	20
1.3. English in International University	22
1.4. The setting of the International Higher Education	24
1.4.1. Related studies with perceptions of international students' language	25
1.5. Problems in English: Introduction	27
1.5.1. Problems in the 4 linguistic skills.....	27
1.5.2. Problems found in sub-skills	31
1.6. Language learning and use strategies in our study	32
1.6.1. Introduction of the theoretical framework	33
1.6.2. What are language learning strategies? Definition and disambiguation.	33
1.6.3. Importance of language learning strategies	35
1.6.4. Oxford's classification of language learning strategies	36
1.6.5. Major themes to be addressed	38

1.6.6. Strategies used in context- L2 skills (Vs. traditional strategy categories)	40
1.6.6.1. Strategies for L2 Reading in Context	40
1.6.6.2. Strategies for L2 Writing in Context	42
1.6.6.3. L2 strategies for Listening, Speaking, Grammar and Vocabulary	43
1.6.7. Cross-linguistic perspective on strategies	44
Chapter 2 Methodology.....	45
2.1. Introduction to research.....	45
2.1.1. Research approach and design.....	45
2.2. Ethical issues	47
2.3 Preparing for the data collection	48
2.3.1. Designing the data collection process.....	48
2.3.2. Sampling process	50
2.3.3. Piloting the interview	51
2.4 Data collection process	52
2.4.1. Interviews	52
2.4.2. Students' notes	52
2.5 Limitations of the research design.....	53
 CHAPTER 3. DATA ANALYSIS 1st PART.....	54
3.1.Introduction.....	54
3.2. Data analysis and discussion of the 1st RQ.....	55
3.2.1. Theme one: Overview of place of English in the life of international students and the perception of their proficiency.....	55
3.2.2. Theme 2: Motivation and anxiety when learning and using English in general and in studies.....	57
3.2.3. Theme 3: Types of English used in the university and the focus of learning.....	59

3.2.4. Theme 4: Ownership of English and interaction with native/non-native speakers.....	61
CHAPTER 4. DISCUSSION- 1ST PART.....	65
CHAPTER 5. DATA ANALYSIS- 2ND PART.....	70
5.1.Introduction.....	71
5.2. R.Q 2: Problems in skills in academia and usage of strategies by the students.....	71
5.2.1. Theme 5: Problems and strategies in academic writing, in doing academic presentations, in participating in group project with classmates, in attending classes, in reading academic papers.....	71
5.3. Academic Writing.....	71
5.4. Doing academic presentations.....	77
5.5. Participating in group projects in the university.....	81
5.6. Attending lectures or academic seminars.....	83
5.7. Reading scientific articles and books.....	84
5.8. Concluding remark.....	86
CHAPTER 6. DISCUSSION- 2ND PART.....	87
6.1. General trends and patterns of strategy use of all participants.....	87
6.2. Writing.....	88
6.3. Grammar.....	89
6.4. Vocabulary.....	90
6.5. Speaking	90
6.6. Listening.....	92
6.7. Reading.....	92
6.8. Patterns of variation in strategy use by proficiency level.....	93
6.9. Pedagogical implications.....	94
CHAPTER 7. STUDENT NOTES - DISCUSSION.....	95
CHAPTER 8. A SHIFTING APPROACH TO ENGLISH IN THE UNIVERSITY.....	98

CHAPTER 9. CONCLUSION.....	100
9.1. Overview of the findings.....	100
9.2. Limitations and recommendations for future research.....	101
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	102
APPENDIX.....	109

List of Abbreviations

- L1 First language
- L2 Second language
- ENL English as a native (standard) language
- EFL English as a foreign language
- ELF English as a lingua franca
- ESL English as a second language
- ELFA English as an academic lingua franca
- NES Native speaker of English
- NNES Non-native speaker of English
- LLS Language learning strategies

Introduction

The aim of this dissertation is to examine an important issue whose basis is the proficiency in English of university students. As it is known, more and more European universities offer educational programs taught entirely in the English language, or to set it from a different angle, more and more graduate students choose to attend courses taught in English. Put it one way or another, the language of instruction may be the native language of neither the professors who teach a certain course nor the students' who attend it. The internationalization of today's university and the use of English as a lingua franca are a matter of fact, enabling millions of students to have access to educational institutions far from their countries, however the matter of how English is used is sometimes neglected. How do graduate students perceive their proficiency in English? Do they consider themselves linguistically skillful enough to use English in its academic sense or they mainly just "communicate" it using sometimes "broken" English in order to make ends meet in an English speaking university? Is there a difference between the standard use of English and English as a lingua franca for them? How the use of the one or the other variety, -or a variety in between-, functions as a tool towards the accomplishment of their academic goals, rather than their infringement?

Having interviewed 20 MA students who attend classes in English in the Catholique Université de Louvain, I also aim to reveal the difficulties these students meet in their use of English, either in writing discourse, in speaking "academically", or in the rest of the skills regardless the presupposed high level of proficiency in English they should have. Last but not least, the detection of the learners' strategies to compensate for any issues they face while using English conclude my research.

The aforementioned issues will be analyzed in detail in this research paper, whose structure will be as follows; in Chapter 1 my aim is to define the terms proficiency, English as a lingua franca and English as a standard variety in today's university and to portray the possible linguistic problems depicted in students' four skills of language learning and the possible strategies to be employed, through the presentation of some highly influential and relevant theories. Chapter 2 elaborates on

the methodological tools that have been used to undertake this study and provides a justification for the use of a multi-methods approach that aims at combining the advantages of two qualitative research tools, i.e. interviews and student notes. The following chapter (Chapter 3) is the presentation of a detailed analysis of the results, namely a presentation of a selection of extracts under each theme, from interviews conducted with students and a presentation of the students' notes on a specific topic. Chapter 4 is devoted to a discussion of the findings with the purpose of analyzing students' views on the topics under investigation. Chapters 5 and 6 aim to present and discuss the remaining findings respectively. Chapter 7 regards the discussion for the student notes. Chapter 8 refers to a proposition for English in the university. Finally, the conclusion (Chapter 9) summarizes my research project and proposes further recommendations for future research, by discussing the limitations of the present study.

Merging together various domains of study, i.e. English as a standard variety vs English as a lingua franca and problems in language use and strategies aiming to resolve those problems under the umbrella term “proficiency” is a highly demanding task to be undertaken but surely worth to be investigated. The objective is to indicate the existing gap in the previous research, to raise a sociolinguistic question about it and to extend the previous knowledge on the fields of ELF and ENL.

Chapter 1 LITERATURE REVIEW

1.1. Proficiency of MA students

This part of the dissertation is focused on scientifically exploring the subject of proficiency which holds the basis of our research and is used as an umbrella term for the rest of our inquiries. Proficiency in English, or proficiency in a language, a confusing phenomenon to be addressed since it is theory-sensitive, will be approached by defining the term and by giving examples of previous studies investigating the phenomenon. Also, the Common European Framework of Reference will be described as it serves the basis of L2 language proficiency assessment. However, it will also be addressed through a discussion attempting to answer some questions which are not automatically visible, to “find out what the facts are” (Hulstijn, 2015, p. 3). Our attempt is to answer what practically leads students to the perception that they are skillful users of a second language or not, and through which practises they identify their level of competence in a language. Do they think that they adequately represent their real level in a language, or are they somehow blurring the situation even more? If this is the case, are there any other factors having an impact on students’ proficiency? Examining the matter from a different perspective can undoubtedly lead to its overall understanding.

1.1.1. Definition

L2 language proficiency is “a person’s overall competence and ability to perform in L2” (Thomas, 1994, p. 330). We see that if we try to define the term we have to take into account the difficulty to achieve such a venture, since one definition yields a second and a third one. Questions like how are competence and ability defined arise. Differently illustrated, “language proficiency may be defined as the ability to use a language effectively and appropriately throughout the range of social, personal, school, and work situations required for daily living in a given society” (Peregoy, Boyle and Cadiero-Kaplan, 2005, p. 34). What is more, in our study we aim to make a distinction between L1 and L2 proficiency, since the center of the research is how L2 users of English perceive their proficiency. Various models of L2 proficiency (formalist, functionalist) have investigated the matter from different dimensions, such as referring to the four language skills and pure linguistic characteristics, such as lexis, syntax or morphology or seeing the language as a the result of a social interaction. According to

Myles (2004), the combination of the two models- the formal and the communicative structures of the language- is the most appropriate way to describe proficiency.

Other central ideas which render L2 proficiency laborious to define are cognition and language competence. Carroll (1981) claimed that “the learning of second languages requires both the acquisition of knowledge about rules and the formation of the habits described by the rules. (...) language habits must be made contingent upon (...) situational meanings” (Carroll, 1981, p. 463-464). In the same paper he acknowledged the significance of cognition. For Noam Chomsky competence is “the speaker- hearer’s knowledge of the language” (Chomsky, 1965, p. 4), that “it has to be revealed through performance (Widdowson, 1978, p. 3) which is distinguished in “usage”; referring to the knowledge of the linguistic rules and “use”; referring to the realization of communication. For Canale and Swain, competence refers to grammatical, sociolinguistic and strategic competence. Related to our second research question lies the strategic competence which refers to the “verbal and non-verbal communication strategies that may be called into action to compensate for breakdowns in communication due to performance variables or to insufficient competence” (Canale and Swain, 1980, p. 30).

1.1.2. Studies on L2 proficiency and important questions to be asked

Except from lexis, syntax, grammar, vocabulary and their acquisition in order to reach high or near-native proficiency in a language, other factors contribute to its development -usually related to social, cultural and behavioural traits. Instead of an overnight accomplishment, proficiency should be seen as a process, developing in different linguistic and situational contexts, with its main aim the communicative competence. Proposed by Hymes (1970), communicative competence is the development of the linguistic, discursive and sociolinguistic competences, showing that there is much more than linguistic knowledge when it comes to really knowing a language. Thus, the perception of oneself related to his/her proficiency in one language may vary according to his/her linguistic, discursive or sociolinguistic understanding. For example, knowing the rules or the formal structures of a language (semantic, syntactic, phonological), being able to produce the target language in a cohesive and coherent oral or written mode and managing to socially situate it are indicators of one’s understanding and relation to the target language. Failing to reach the desired

proficiency in the L2 can be explained if we refer to Gardner (1985) and his socio-educational model according to which social and cultural beliefs, learner differences (motivation, anxiety, aptitude), the setting that the language is used and the learning outcomes can affect the learners' communicative competence and as a consequence the proficiency in a language. What is more, practicing a language by constructing or transforming meaning, composing, revising, and practically producing it, can play a major role in mastering an advanced level. This continuous effort of developing one's language can sometimes fall in a state of stagnancy or inactivity because the learner realizes a continued lack of progress in L2 or due to negative attitude towards the L2. Interrelated is the lack of motivation or the feeling of social and psychological distance between him/her and the target culture. Self-perception of the L2 ability itself can be a factor affecting the proficiency in a language, however usually related to the anxiety and motivation.

At this point of the discussion an important question can arise, that being "which is the real relation between the self-perception of proficiency and the actual proficiency"? It can be assumed that there is a positive relation between the two, however the way it is usually assessed – through standardized tests which assess the general competence in the four linguistics skills – cannot always depict that. This goes in hand with those tests' inability to shed light on the real tasks, goals and objectives of a particular program where language has to be appropriately and academically used. In a study conducted by Takahashi (2008) on the relationship between the self-perception of proficiency of students and their actual proficiency, he found out that "the students who perceived themselves as having higher English ability showed higher proficiency and achieved more: they tended to score higher in the proficiency test and their grades on the final examinations were better". (Takahashi, 2008, p. 44). The relation between perception of good qualifications and good performance seems to be reciprocal, but as the data showed this relationship was weaker than expected because in the notion of self-perception many affective factors play an important role. Thus, it can be concluded that the relationship between the two can be deceptive and not representing the reality in high degree. This can be explained if the notion of facilitating anxiety (FA) is taken in consideration. FA is a type of anxiety that helps the learner approach the learning task successfully and is associated with higher motivation and lower "negative" anxiety. In practice, this means that students who feel more competent, whose self-

image as learners is positive, are more confident and thus more successful. The positive relation between self-perceived proficiency and facilitating anxiety ($r=.368$, $p<.01$) was the strongest in the study described, even stronger than the relation between self-perception and real ability ($r=.249$, $p<.05$). Partly the same results were obtained in a similar study conducted by Takahashi (2004) where it was found that there is a positive association between FA and proficiency but not performance.

In a study conducted by Stringer and Heath (2008), they also found out that there is no causal relationship between the self-perception of academic performance and real academic achievement. It is neither direct nor simple. They assert that the self-perception is mostly connected with the idea of “emotional well-being” (Stringer and Heath, 2008, p. 339); employed to protect oneself from the implication of failure. “If self-perceived competence were either the cause or the result of changes in performance, it should track change in performance. The lack of change in self-perception despite change in performance strongly implies independence between the two factors” (Stringer and Heath, 2008, p. 340). Thus, it can be concluded that self-perfection is usually subjective and mistaken due to the learners’ inclination to misjudge their real competences, by either overestimating or underestimate them. Szyszka (2011) in a study on foreign language anxiety and self-perceived English pronunciation competence discovered a negative correlation between the two. It was unravelled that the more anxious participants perceived their pronunciation as poor, while the ones who experienced lower levels of anxiety asserted that their pronunciation is better. “If they noticed that their pronunciation is far from what they perceive as being competent, they may feel apprehensive” (Szyszka, 2011, p. 295).

1.1.3. Tests used to assess proficiency in English and the Common European Framework of Reference

As international applications in higher education rise, international universities request a proof of a high level of proficiency from the students-to-be. English Proficiency Tests are very well designed and intended to serve this role. Some of the most common ones are the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) and International Language Testing System (IELTS). The tests are either paper or computer based and examine the competence in the four language skills: Reading, Speaking, Listening, Writing. When it comes to educational assessment of L2 proficiency in Europe, the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) (Council of Europe, 2001) is accepted

as the fundamentally legitimate model distinguishing six levels of proficiency and a basis for the design of curricula and language syllabi. It describes the way the learners may be able to learn a foreign language and “what knowledge and skills they have to develop so as to be able to act effectively. The description also covers the cultural context in which language is set (...) defines the levels of proficiency (...)” (Council of Europe, 2001, p. 1).

CEFR is comprised of six levels of proficiency, namely, “A1 (Breakthrough), A2 (Waystage), B1 (Threshold), B2 (Vantage), C1 (Effective Operational Proficiency) and C2 (Mastery) level” (Council of Europe, 2001, p. 23). It has to be taken into account that the level of proficiency of the MA students who participated in the study is C1-C2 according to the scale of CEFR, that being proved either by some students’ results from the IELTS proficiency test or by the fact that the exchange students were formally assessed before the exchange period started by the Erasmus+ language assessment. This is a mandatory step that all the exchange students go through and it refers to an online assessment of the four language skills. The question, however, is the following: Do these students find themselves at C1 or C2 level of proficiency in academic situations? And what does it practically mean? How do they perceive their own linguistic competence in English? It was a challenge for me to investigate the divergent views of students who were previously assessed as highly proficient in English -as international students in an international university where English is used as the medium of instruction and overall communication in the institution- and discover how potential weaknesses are faced by them.

1.2. English in the world

Having defined the intricate term “proficiency” in the previous section and having seen the continua of its assessment and how it was addressed by several scientific studies, we need to scrutinize the second part, that being “in English”. In this section, a general presentation of the notions will take place; how English is used generally in the world nowadays. The context of the international university and how English is realized there will be presented later.

English is fairly called “today’s global language” if “one considers the dramatic expansion in the roles of English as a language of international communication in trade, diplomacy, sport, science, technology and countless other fields” (Rubdy and Saraceni, 2006, p. 5). Many criticized this development due to the phobia of de-standardization of the language, or put it simply, its differentiation from the canonical forms. One realization of its development is the fact that the non-native speakers of English in today’s world outnumber the native speakers. “This has led to a shift in the numerical balance of power between native and non- native speaker groups” (Rubdy and Saraceni, 2006, p. 5). What is more, its predominance is also found on the variety of the contexts that English is used which are numerous and presuppose diversity. As this phenomenon is confusing in its understanding and realization, certain definitions should be hereby presented, in order for the subject to become more clear and questions such as “What is Standard English? What is the English we use in the international setting? What English is used in the academic setting?” to be answered and lead to the unraveling of our argument. As different varieties of English are used in different regions of the world, the language that is taught in the classroom as a second or foreign language has adapted to those regional varieties and vice versa and as it seems what has been the matter of investigation is the question on whether there is a consensus on which variety is preferred. In the section below, the definitions of Standard English, World Englishes and English as an International or Lingua Franca will be discussed. Providing definitions is crucial since the relation between the established models and our rationale may unfold.

Starting with Standard English, it should be acknowledged that it is the most accepted model and the reference point of discussion for English. It is considered to be the “conventional” or “canonical” one, as it is realized in a written formal variety which suits for a standardized written communication and its users are supposed to conform to a structured grammar and lexis combination. The Anglo-American model of the native-speaker emerges and is established into the English classroom where “the vast majority of teaching materials are based on British and/or American English, something that for most of the teachers around the world is fairly unproblematic” (Rubdy and Saraceni, 2006, p. 6). At the other end of the spectrum, some teachers and language researchers have questioned the stereotypical view of the native-speaking pattern being the only legitimate or authentic one. This places the majority of English teachers who

are not native speakers of the language in a disempowering position. “The notion of a monolithic, unadaptable linguistic medium owned by its original speakers and forever linked to their rules has been rejected as naive and untenable” (Seidlhofer and Jenkins, 2003, p. 141). World Englishes, a model which has created a relative conflict and ambiguity among linguists and researchers, since it refers to the standardized linguistic expressions of local communities whose their nativeness does not correspond to the dominant varieties of British or American English; thus, “concern has been expressed about the uncontrolled spread of nativized forms of English on the grounds of linguistic fragmentation” (Rubdy and Saraceni, 2006, p. 7). The concern lies on the development of divergent local varieties of English which may not be mutually comprehensible among its users. For Jennifer Jenkins this affects the pronunciation of English, if we take into account her words that “there is a danger that these varieties will move further and further apart until a stage is reached where pronunciation presents a serious obstacle to lingua franca communication” (Jenkins, 2000, p. 35).

Last but not least, the model having been proposed as the most suitable in terms of the English usage is called English as a Lingua Franca. It reflects the usage of English from both native and non-native users of English -mostly among non-native speakers- for their communication and better understanding, thus having been qualified an international role which stems from various domains of international interactions; from business to travelling and education to sport. Jenkins and Barbara Seidlhofer described ELF as a hybrid form which combines characteristics of Standard English with some features used by non-native users of the language. Jenkin’s framework on pronunciation patterns in English abstain from considering the different accents as deficiencies but as differences. This differentiation lies in its appropriateness; how close or far a given pronunciation is to the core form of English, this being English in its standard form. This means that the matter of proximity on the core plays a determining role. Her framework reverses the established notion (so far) for a non-native speaker to adhere to the ENL norm and orients it towards a new sociolinguistic understanding where pronunciation errors are errors only when mutual understanding is undermined. According to Rubdy and Saraceni (2006), “local diversity in specific linguistic contexts is catered for. However, the criterion of mutual intelligibility becomes suspect, particularly when its loss or absence is implicitly linked with violations of ENL norms” (p. 9). This means that since there is not an established common reference among the

people who use ELF in terms of pronunciation -two people may use two different representations of the pronunciation of a word- their mutual understanding may be hindered, and that is a violation of the ENL norm.

1.2.1. Previous research on ELF and Standard Use of English.

Understanding the notions presented above, the ideas of some researchers on the topic may be put forward. It needs to be asserted that in the debate the linguistic paradigm followed in countries where English has become ‘nativized’ is not included, since our research is based in Europe, and so the focus will be on ELF in the Expanding Circle, i.e. on English used in regions where it is learned as a foreign language. This will be presented in contrast to the Standard use of English. Starting with Seidlhofer’s article (2006) on what English as a lingua franca isn’t, she proposes that ELF refers to a variety which accepts “tolerance for diversity and appropriacy of use in specific sociolinguistic contexts” (p. 40) placed in the bigger picture of the polymorphous nature of the English language in general. It stands as the diversified variety of English used mostly in the Outer Circle (Kachru 2009) usually expected to conform to the Inner Circle characteristics, but what seems interesting is that speakers in the Outer Circle can use it “in their own way, which sometimes may and sometimes may not conform to Inner Circle English” (p. 42), reflecting its pluralistic context. For Seidlhofer, crucial is the codification of the language, a venture attempted by compiling the Vienna-Oxford International Corpus of English (VOICE) in order to group and understand its prevalent characteristics and consequently observe its diversity. Canagarajah (2006), an other advocator of English as a Lingua Franca asserted that there is no need to examine someone’s linguistic skills and level of proficiency according to inherited or environmental characteristics. “Skill in Standard English, or lack of it, is the linguistic form of inequality that really matters” (2006, as cited in Rudby and Saraceni, 2006, p. 99). So, a good user of English is the person who has the ability to adequately use the standard variety of the language in writing and cannot be related to nativeness. “To put it starkly: without any further information to help your decision, who would you prefer to edit your writing: a non-native speaker of English who is a Professor of English at an Indian (or a Belgian) university, or a monolingual Brit who left school with no qualifications at the age of 15?” (p. 99).

Regarding the second variety under investigation, the concept of English as a Standard Language represents the point of reference, the standardized form of the language, or else the norm and it will be described below. It is maybe difficult to define it when it comes to the spoken form. Its representation in speech is “weak”, however the matter of pronunciation aims to consolidate mutual understanding among the interlocutors. For example, if one pronounces the words *charismatic* and *child* with the same sound is incorrect. But there is no standard accent in English, notwithstanding the received pronunciation (RP) is very famous for its high-prestige since it is used by speakers of a particular social class. Users of English from other regions in the Inner Circle and also users of English from the Outer and Expanding circles may find it difficult to comprehend the accent of a local variety and interlocutors shall be patient and tolerant towards it. The renowned and more powerful manifestation of Standard English is its written form, where diversity is rare. As Anthea Fraser Gupta (2006) asserts “I take Standard English as a written performative: it is something writers are supposed to produce in certain contexts, and on which they will accept the possibility of correction, by spellchecks, dictionaries and editors. I will be offended if you correct the way I pronounce the vowel of dance [/dans/], but I will be grateful if you correct my spelling of concensus to consensus” (Gupta, 2006, as found in Rudby and Saraceni, p. 97).

1.2.2. Which variety is used in the university?

At this point, the question of which variety or model (these terms are used interchangeably in the the dissertation) of English is appropriate for the setting of the international university arises. Students tend to use English in both formal and informal contexts in their academic lives and both sides, namely ELF and ENL are expressed. It seems that a continuum between strict formality and informality can be situated and students can use too formal, just formal or too informal English- depending on the context. For example, when they have to write an academic paper or do an academic presentation, the standard variety of English is preferred, while when they interact with each other in less formal situations, i.e. when they participate in group projects with their classmates, they mostly use less formal English. By supporting the ELF model, the ‘authoritarianism’ of the standard forms in English is followed by a question

mark, enabling an alternative pattern to come to the forefront and propose the systematic codification of English as a Lingua Franca which -only when the totality of its features become salient- can be used as a pedagogical model to foreign language teaching. On the other hand, the critics of ELF disregard the preference towards this model as they think it will change or adjust the existing rules on the teaching and learning English, it will create a new codified language “expected to transcend all communal and cultural boundaries” (p. 10) which is diverse and lexicogrammatically speaking less sophisticated and functional. So far, the standard variety of English is somehow favored as it resonates with the original usage of English which carries authority, power, tradition and stability, and in fact reflects the formality of the university.

Another model, open for usage in academia, which is proposed by various researchers is a hybrid and multifunctional one where English is diverse in its realization, fairly similar and different from both Standard English and English as a Lingua Franca. The model is presented in the next section.

1.2.3. The model “in between”

The idea that prevailed from the discussion so far and that should be put in the forefront is that English is English. It refers to one language which is used differently depending on the context and the situation. Its heterogeneous and polymorphous nature accepts all the differences and denies all the false dichotomies; there are no binary differences among the different realizations but only pluricentric ideas, tolerance, diversity and acceptance. Accepting the diversity entails that the varieties of English (ENL, EFL, ELF, ESL, World Englishes) are used by certain groups in various sociocultural settings with the aim to serve a certain purpose. For example, the proponents of the ELF variety assert that the aim is the adequate intercultural communication among the interlocutors. Usually simplifications of the standard linguistic forms and deletion of the redundancies take place by reducing the “grammatical idiosyncrasies of Standard English” (Trudgill, 2002, p. 98). The important is that “speakers in ELF settings will often make use of the resources in their linguistic repertoires in ways that are both efficient and effective (for communicative purposes), but that they do so with acute awareness of the identities of their interlocutors (Jenkins et al., 2011, p. 291). What is more, more pragmatic and communicative skills are usually used to opt for the “on-the-

spot accommodation to interlocutors' language use" (MacKenzie, 2014, p. 69). On the other hand, the advocates of the prescriptive form of English, that being the normative variety, may use it in more professional and formal environments. It is an undoubted truth that some aspects of the standard variety, for example, formulaic phrases, multi-word units and patterns which do not resort either in the grammaticality or vocabulary knowledge of a language, but on the phraseology and the collocations which are prefabricated aspects of it, are usually a big burden even for advanced users of a language.

For Phillipson (2015) "it is difficult to see any relevance" [towards ELF] "for higher education, where accuracy of lexis, syntax, and discourse in both speech and writing, and international intelligibility, are of paramount importance". (Phillipson, 2015, as found in Dimova, Hultgren and Jensen, p. 33). Taking Phillipson's idea as our stepping-stone we can refer to our context of investigation and the setting of the international university where English is used in both written and spoken forms, in both formal and less formal situations, where it can be assumed that both varieties (English as a standard language and English as a lingua franca) are used and are even interchangeable. The model-in between is reflected according to Jenkins in (2014) "a paradigm-shifting approach: English as an Academic Lingua Franca" (p. 61) which can constitute the appropriate variety to be used in the setting where academic English is widely practiced. At this point of the presentation of the various theories, it is crucial to refer to what actually happens in the academic setting which makes it difficult to compare with other situations when it comes to the English usage. The difference lies in that so far, the normative variety of English has been favored in the university given the formality of academia. The stake is that any other variety in English -which possibly appears as more relaxing, or encompasses more communicative situations where for examples mistakes are not considered as mistakes- is difficult to be adopted, because such a variety has not yet existed. Of course it exists in other situations, but not in the academic setting where formality is necessary, however the users of the language are not native users, so by default they cannot be as effective or correct as a native would be. Hence, the academic community is not a community which shares a norm or a common linguistic system established only for it. Its common system is the standard use of English. Hence, it can be deduced, that the creation of such a common system which is functional in academia requires specific conditions which have to be fulfilled.

A simple agreement on it would not presuppose its applicability because it has not been described yet. So a question arises; whether academics and students in academic institutions have the right to aim at a new standard of English, specific to the academic context, which is not the already established standard variety usually referring to British English. And also whether this artificial variety can be really functional and globally adopted.

For Ferguson (2012, p. 178) “teaching ELF is far more than teaching a collection of forms, though this is, of course, still necessary”, concluding that teaching the structures found in Standard English is undoubtedly the case- especially when it comes to the written language. For Prodromou (2008, p. 254) “it would be irresponsible to encourage the learners to assume that they can do without standard forms of the language”. The aim of this section was not to judge or decide which is the appropriate or correct model of English to be taught or used but to raise a question on a variety - usually referred as models in this paper for the matter of synonymity - which would be legitimate and specific to the academic context, but does not presuppose that one’s competence should be native or near-native in order to be able to deal with his studies.

1.3. English in International University

With respect to the last subtopic “English in the International University”, I am particularly interested in presenting how nowadays’ global perception of English affects higher education. Taking into account the globalized academic reality where students from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds interweave, all aspired to get taught through the medium of the English language, certain notions escorting the idea of English in Higher Education will be described and the last part of the ball of yarn may be untangled. Hopefully, the way out of the labyrinth shall be cleared out. The central focus of this operation is the ‘international student’.

“By the increased mobility of academics and students, and by the increased ease of international communication” (Ferguson, 2007, p. 14) the university has been globalized, and so have teaching and researching. He claims that universities have introduced courses or whole educational programmes in English “to attract fee-paying international students, to enhance the university’s international prestige and contacts and to develop the English language skills of their staff and students” (p. 13). The question of what in practice this entails when the language is actually used may be

presented in this study from the point of view of the international students themselves. So far, the issue of the language in the concept of the international university “is rarely mentioned other than in a passing reference to the fact that the internationalization process is accompanied by the use of English as the global academic lingua franca” (Jenkins, 2014, p. 10). For students, the trend has been that they should gain the skills and the level of the native English speakers in order to be able to adequately use this new linguistic variety. The adherence towards the standardized form of English which is realized as an institutionalized reality that cannot be doubted is further empowered by the entry tests the students have to take before their admission at the university and the EAP courses provided to newly admitted students. These seem to have a major impact on the students’ linguistic and academic lives. Linguistic issues play a pivotal role in their progress as students of the international university. “For them, language is a central rather than peripheral player in the work of higher education. They are well aware that English has a major impact on their university experiences” (Jenkins, 2014, p. 12). Especially regarding students in postgraduate level -who also constitute the group of participants in my study- they are usually enrolled in English speaking programmes and they mostly build social relationships with non-native speakers of English. For Durant and Shepherd (2009), this student population which serves as sample “provides an interesting case of what would have been called, in an older vocabulary, a multicultural ‘melting pot’” and “offers potentially important observations about intercultural contact and globalization (Durant and Shepherd, 2009, p. 159).

However, most commonly they are negatively labeled and stigmatized since they are moderators of linguistic diversity and hybridity, which may be realized through some errors, for example grammatical mistakes. Those mistakes are usually tolerated but never accepted as a legitimate occurrence of English. And exactly the reason why they are not legitimized is because they do not adhere to the linguistic norms shared by the members of the academic community. These mistakes are not accepted because they are not systematized linguistic expression and they do not constitute a shared and regular usage. In academia, the model accepted as normative so far is the Standard variety of English, which is the authorized model of use shared by a community of users. “Thus, NNES in higher education, who should be entitled to feel that they have the identity of a legitimate university student and that they have left behind the difficult

years of doing ESL (...) are made to feel they need, to take EAP courses to improve their English” (Jenkins, 2014, p. 13,14).

According to Mauranen and Ranta (2008), this “calls for a better understanding of the way English is used in the new circumstances where the native speaker may not be present, and where Standard [i.e. native] English may not be the most relevant norm” (Mauranen and Ranta, 2008, p. 199). For sure, Standard English may not be the most relevant norm for the academic context since it does not address native speakers, however an other model, different from the one that already exists has not yet developed, described and standardized in order to be used.

1.4. The setting of the International Higher Education

After presenting the various realizations of English in the international university, a more detailed reading on how English has established in the university shall take place. The setting of our investigation, Université Catholique de Louvain, and the fact that it offers courses taught in English has been established according the formulations existing in higher education, for example the Bologna Declaration in 1999 according to which students can move freely from one country to another with the aim to further study in it without having to sit for any entry exams or fulfil some entry requirements, rather, that was made possible by simply using prior qualifications obtained in the first country. The aim of this agreement, the mobility of students at university level -mostly at master’s level- around Europe and the welcoming of students from overseas, had as a result or consequence the need to introduce various whole programmes or courses at universities in English, in non-English speaking countries in Europe. “Most sources appear to document an unequivocal rise in the provision of English-medium instruction. An increase of 38 per cent has been noted at master’s level in just one and a half years from the end of 2011 to June 2013” (Dimova, Hultgren & Jensen, 2015, p. 3). Also, “the EU promoted and lavishly funded programs such as ERASMUS+ that provided large numbers of EU university students with academic experiences outside their home country” (Altback and Knight, 2007, p. 293). The need then, to pose English as the official medium of instruction in various universities was triggered by the fact that communication among all these students with different L1s should have been enabled; that being easily achieved through the use of English. Englishization, the use of English in higher education is undoubtedly related to the Bologna Process.

This means that the instruction in English offers to students the desired exposure to the language, benefiting them in terms of the development of their linguistic proficiency. It is beyond question that their linguistic competence constantly improves since the input they are provided is enough to help them enhance their skills. At the other end of the spectrum, the boom of the English instruction has provoked critique on that matter too. Claims asserting the careless or sloppy introduction of teaching in English as a weak step from the educators' side, as what could happen is "experimenting with instruction in a foreign language" (Simonsen, 2005, p. 262), due to their sometimes lower proficiency. This goes hand in hand with a possible negative impact on the quality of teaching, either by leaving certain domain content uncovered or spending too much time explaining a notion. Overall, "teachers' inappropriate command of the language might negatively influence classroom interaction and dynamics" (Margic and Vodopija-Krstanovic, 2015, p. 46). Of course, the same thoughts apply to the limited proficiency in English from the part of the students which may interfere in their effort to adequately acquire the language, cause communication problems, reduce their participation in class and may bring the contrary effect on students' anxiety and motivation.

The attempt to upgrade the quality of higher education through the instruction in English has undoubtedly entrained positive results in the body of academia, with the one being more significant the mobility of more and more students worldwide towards interest in international curricula and research domains. "Australian experts argue that perhaps 15 million students will study abroad by 2025" (Altback and Knight, 2007, p. 303). However, an important question to be raised in our study is how the majority of the international students react to this reform. Do they feel proficient enough to face an academic career happening in its totality in English?

1.4.1. Related studies with perceptions of international students' language

In a study conducted by Jenkins (2014), she investigated the perceptions of international and home students in British universities on the effects of the English language policies and practices in their academic lives, the effects on their academic identities and their opinions on the native and non-native users of English. She included international students in her research sample as she found it relatively rare and undoubtedly interesting to give the opportunity to them to have a voice about linguistic issues they come across. She particularly asserts that most of the studies in this field so far refer to

the cultural, rather than the linguistic aspect of the international student life. Ryan (2013) approached the linguistic issue only from the perspective of the linguistically 'deficient' international students and the need to provide them with EAP remedial courses to enhance their proficiency. Fraser (2011) conducted an empirical study exploring the perceptions of both native and non-native students and staff on their intercultural and communicative skills paying bigger attention to the speaking and listening skills. In Australia, Ryan and Viete (2009), examined the how the native English standards affect the international students' self-identity and self-esteem. Fraser's and other studies are important contributions to the field, but as already stated, only a few of them constitute an empirical interest on the language-related experiences of international students with different L1s. In the local setting of Belgium, Van de Poel and Xu (2011) examined the attitudes of 69 university students in the university of Antwerp towards ELF as a theoretical notion and as a practical issue in their lives. From the results it is visible that the students are open towards the ELF concept and consider it as a legitimate way of using the language as long as its features do not hinder communication. However, regarding their preference on which variety they would like to use themselves, it seems that they adhere to the native standard norm. An analogous case study was performed by a student at the university of Louvain in 2015 as the topic of her master thesis. The aim of the dissertation was to explore the perception of students to ELF in the French speaking part of Belgium as a replication of the study conducted in Flanders.

The main focus of both of these studies was to investigate the attitudes towards the ELF and examine if they agree with the view of Jenkins and Seidlhofer on the right of the non-native speakers over English. In the current dissertation, the topics addressed in those two studies which constitute two relevant examples of studies conducted at international universities in Belgium are definitely addressed/covered. Those refer to the students' general overview of the place that English has in their lives, their motivation towards learning English, the ownership of English and the ideas towards other varieties, their thoughts on native and non-native usage of the language and the ELF communication. However, some extra emphasis will be placed on how English is actually used in certain practical aspects of the students' academic lives, i.e. what English they use when they have to write an academic paper (plus any problems and strategies) or what language they employ when they speak with their professors;

without too much emphasis on their social and personal lives. For example, the idea that students are required or asked to use a certain variety of English at a particularly high level is an undoubted truth. In this direction, their viewpoints on their linguistic proficiency and the reasons behind them will be discussed on the whole. As this is the reality emerging in the university nowadays, it is very interesting to expand the level of enquiries. The previous studies referred mostly to the aspect of speaking and supplementarily listening (rather than writing) and what linguistic variety is preferred in situations when speaking is included. It is also important to make a small comment -before the chapter on methods follows next- on the sample of the students participating in our research, those being master students coming from various fields of studies and different L1s; thus building a heterogeneous sample group whose views are at least interesting. Thus, investigating the issues addressed in these two previous studies, plus drawing on the real practices taking place in the academic everyday lives of the students, is an effort to approach this polymorphous and polysemous topic towards its broad understanding.

1.5. Problems in English: Introduction

The second part of this paper, refers to the challenges that graduate students in Catholique Université de Louvain face according to the reference of English as an academic language (which is widely used at the university) in the four skills and in some relevant areas of the academic life. Also, the strategies they use in order to opt for mutual comprehension shall take place by first presenting the relevant theoretical background. Starting with the first subtopic, the linguistic difficulties occurring in the graduate students' life shall be brought forward below. However, the need to briefly present the four skills and related areas which may be in the center of the process of finding out both the weaknesses and the strategies is crucial, since languages are taught and assessed regarding those. Writing and speaking are the productive skills, while listening and reading are the receptive ones. Using a language and its systems effectively presupposes that all four language skills are well developed and put in practice when incorporated in activities.

1.5.1. Problems in the 4 linguistic skills

Regarding writing, one of the two productive language skills, is a rather complicating skill referring to the ability of the student to construct meaning by putting

together grammar, vocabulary and structure. Regarding speaking, the second productive skills, is also undoubtedly complicated as it first develops implicitly with the acquisition of the language and the development of the vocabulary, however its production indicates a good learning of the language and its structure, especially at the university level where proper academic speaking and terminology undoubtedly mean more than just pronouncing words. Speaking is nonetheless connected to listening. The communication between the speaker and the listener -the interlocutors- is established by their communicative ability and their effort to reach some meaning towards mutual understanding. Its complementary skill but receptive in its nature, listening, refers to the skill where individual sounds and cognition, along with attention and developed vocabulary range are combined in order to receive a meaningful message coming from the speech of an interlocutor. At last, the last receptive skill, reading, presupposes the knowledge of the system of the target language, starting from the knowledge of the alphabet and the pronunciation of the words. The silent skill, through which we receive information and communicate it back to ourselves, developing in that way our grammar and vocabulary acquisition, is usually found in activities whose goal is more than simply read a text. Cognition plays an important role in deriving meaning through reading, and only through practice and critical thinking this skill can transform into a valuable asset in one's life.

At this point of the paper, the main argument concerning the linguistic problems of the graduate students in the four language skills should be introduced. Writing, and even more academic writing is a demanding procedure which takes place during the years of the university, and unfortunately it does not come out without relative difficulty or challenge from the part of the students. Some examples of challenges in producing written language in a cohesive and structured way in academic English may presuppose problems with grammar, syntax and sentence organization, thus basic deficiencies which were not covered in the years of high school or the first years of the university education. The issue of the incomplete or inconsistent sentence structure, originating from either the difficulty to specifically address or elaborate on the topic under examination definitely leads to a poor text in terms of structure, and often poor in content and argument unfolding. These may come along with poor spelling skills, lack of punctuation and poor vocabulary, another significant deficiency accompanying

the poor writing skills. Also, one may face problems in self-managing skills and difficulty in organizing the structure of a text.

Concerning speaking, exactly like in writing, they may lack the necessary vocabulary, grammar or pronunciation skills to get their meaning across, and as a consequence they may not be able to adequately interact with each other or with their professors; in opposition with the general belief that they are adequately trained to use the language in a near-native level. “Even extensive knowledge of the target language’s grammar and vocabulary often presented by advanced students of foreign language departments does not guarantee success in oral communication when this knowledge is not properly integrated or accessed” (Aleksandrak, 2011, p. 38). Another issue related to speaking weaknesses is the automatic formulation of utterances in the student’s native language first, leading to non natural discourse. Ur (1995, p.121) identified some problems connected to speaking and these are:

inhibition – fear of making mistakes, losing face, criticism; shyness;

nothing to say – learners have problems with finding motives to speak, formulating opinions or relevant comments;

low or uneven participation – often caused by the tendency of some learners to dominate in the group;

mother-tongue use – particularly common in less disciplined or less motivated classes, learners find it easier or more natural to express themselves in their native language.

Last but not least, the speaking activities should not be restricted in the in-classroom interactions because usually they tend to be very limited in their scope, usually focusing on practical matters than on a real conversation on the topic discussed. The speaking part is more often teacher oriented, as it is supposed to be the job of the professors to produce as much output as possible as they are the lecturers. In that manner, the utterances produced by the students are mostly short turns which are even employed by the minority of them if we take into account the speaking problems presented right above. It seems that the activities which presuppose extensive speaking from the part of the students are either in oral presentations where they should mostly use formal

language or group work projects where a group of students should work on a particular project and usually they tend to speak informally to each other, with the exception of the terminology used by them when needed. As it is documented from previous research, errors can be made because of the communicative stress. “It would be understandable that when communicative stress rises, the speaker has less attentional capacity available for other aspects of performance” (Lynch, Maclean, 2003, p. 37)

In relation to what was just referred about speaking and the limited chances students have to practice it, it is time to make a comment on its complementary skill, that being listening. Usually, listening together with reading are the two skills students are mostly provided with input from. Advanced students who study in English often find difficulties in listening to extensive lectures and comprehend the speech of native speakers, i.e their pronunciation, in all kinds of communicative situations, especially in the formal situation of listening to an academic lecture (Paulston and Bruder, 1976, p. 278). Underwood (1989) grouped the difficulties found in listening in seven categories, taking into account the education and the culture of the students. The categories are: “a) lacking control over the speed at which speakers speak, b) needing repetition but not getting it, c) having limited vocabulary, d) failing to recognize signals in listening, e) being unable to interpret input, f) being unable to concentrate, g) having poor habits” (Oxford, 2017, p. 290). Therefore, we see that the listener’s awareness is an important cognitive process for comprehension and its regulation either helps or infringes it, along with L1 and L2 listening ability and vocabulary knowledge. Related to these two skills is the relevant skill of pronunciation, usually with reference to a standard. Problems in intonation, accent, articulation and stress come very first in the list of second language usage difficulties. Patterning the speech sounds in a language with accuracy is usually very difficult for L2 learners, even in advanced stages, since beginning learning a second language later in life may never lead to native-like pronunciation. Of course, various factors play an important role to its realization or not, related to the L2 learner’s motivation, “self-monitoring, imitation of the native speakers, attention to difficult phonological terms, and an explicit concern for pronunciation accuracy” (Oxford, 2017, p. 295).

The fourth skill to be presented, refers to reading. Actualized in a similar way as listening as it refers to the encoding of a message rather than its decoding,

understanding through reading may be sometimes locked; that being rendered in the difficulty of the learners or users of a second language to understand either individual words or phrases or even whole chunks of texts. Comprehension may be prohibited either if the grammatical structures and syntax are too complex and the vocabulary used too idiomatic, or if the ideas (content) elaborated too vague or scientific. The inability to detect coherence and the understanding of ideas or the difficulty to paraphrase and summarize the text's meaning are also usual. It is generally supposed by learners that reading is usually boring or passive, however, it is true that it is an active process developed between the text and the reader. The reader relates his previous world knowledge, subject and linguistic knowledge to reflect on what he/she reads and eventually acquires understanding. So, the meaning is drawn upon the connection of semantics, discourse analysis and syntax. In a study conducted by Bernhardt (2005) it was found that L2 reading is affected by both L1 reading ability and L2 proficiency.

1.5.2. Problems found in sub-skills

Regarding the subfield of vocabulary, knowing what a word means is much more than knowing a dictionary definition. It cannot be doubted that academic achievement relies heavily on “readily accessible vocabulary knowledge for reading, writing, speaking and listening” (Oxford, 2017, p. 255). Readily accessible vocabulary knowledge means being able to deal with word difficulties, such as when the form of the word changes, with its grammatical use, e.g. plural forms, noun gender forms, prefixes, collocations, connotations, discourse functions in different contexts and acquiring all those shades quickly in order to be able to use them adequately in academic contexts. For Pawlak (2013) learning grammar is understanding and knowing the rules that create the structures and “trying to use these rules in spontaneous, real-time communication” (p. 193). Even advanced learners usually face problems in the grammatical structures but it is fruitless to speak about grammar if we do not take into account the notion of the context. Especially in our venture to examine how language is used for reading, listening, speaking and writing through authentic and meaningful activities, grammar is an integral part of those. Some mistakes in grammar which students usually make are for example, the students' omission of the third person singular -s, the distinction between countable and uncountable forms, the distinction between simple and continuous tense forms when it comes to stative verbs and the past

tense of irregular verbs. What is more, preposition and article use may be difficult for some learners even in an advanced proficiency level in combination with the academic context. As a concluding point we could refer to Trudgill's (1999) "grammatical idiosyncrasies of Standard English" which are avoided by the users of English in the cases that they do not seem important to them. At the other end of the spectrum and according to the specific context that English is used in our research- that being the academic setting- the 'errors' are perceived as errors which should be learnt and corrected. Thus, by taking into account the given scenario, the violation of the typologies described above are considered as errors in academia since they reflect non-legitimate changes of the standard forms which are used in the university.

1.6. Language learning and use strategies in our study

The purpose of this part of our research project dealing with the LLS topic is to investigate the language learning strategies used by graduate students in the University of Louvain in order to compensate for the linguistic problems they face as non-native users of the English language in the setting of the international university, where the need to be an independent learner, and in our study, an independent language user has a pivotal role. In particular, our interest of investigation is situated in the narrative of the students whose goal is to face the linguistic problems they endeavor as academic users of the English language. The strategies chronicled by them may contribute to the body of educational knowledge by enlightening with useful information the university staff and the international services who deal with issues concerning international students on the macro level. The significance of this study lies in the fact that on the micro level the goal is to examine their LLS use in accordance with their general proficiency in English and to raise awareness among the students that LLS are teachable, taking into account some theories which may be presented as this section unfolds. Coming to a pedagogical conclusion implying that LLS can be taught from the more successful users of English to the less skilled ones could serve as a tread to introduce the teaching of LLS for academic purposes; that is to say to encourage the improvement of the students' language skills in the context of the international university.

1.6.1. Introduction of the theoretical framework

The aim of this section is to present the theoretical framework which is related to language learning and language use strategies in a second language. It is regarded as a topic rather ambiguous since there is still no generally accepted definition of the concept of LLS. It has been the subject of investigation in various subfields of applied linguistics the last half century, but little is known about its exploration in a context akin to our study, namely the discovery of the learners' strategies in the independent setting of the university. The context of independence in learning is not an uncommon or exceptional phenomenon in the acquisition or retention of a language, notably in the setting of the international university where the English language is thoroughly promoted and mostly used by the students autonomously, as teachers do not play a crucial role in its developing, in presenting for example a grammatical rule. As stated in Hurd and Lewis, "an important question arising from this perspective is the extent to which, in any form of independent language learning, learners can participate in and control their learning experiences, whether in terms of opportunity, disposition or ability" (2008, p. 6,7). Especially in the setting of the international university where students as experienced users of the target language -in our study, English-, in comparison to more dependent settings such as classroom or online teaching, they are supposed to recognize their linguistic difficulties or acknowledge their weaknesses and needs. In case that the students do not have a clear view of them and in an attempt to affect learning in general and improve the language learning, the bet is to provide the "learners with insights into those challenges and the ways they can respond to them through strategy use" (White, 2008, p. 9).

Various topics which are related to the investigation of LLS, for instance, its teachability or its purpose to enhance one's proficiency in general will be addressed and disambiguated in order for the term to be understood and its association to our study to be revealed. Also, the definition of the notion, a certain categorization of the LLS and the breakdown of its characteristics will take place in the following section.

1.6.2. What are language learning strategies? Definition and disambiguation.

First noted by Wenden in 1991 and later realized by Cohen in 2007, the term strategy has been a highly controversial one, however we can define it as follows: "Language

learning strategies are commonly defined as the operations and processes which are consciously selected and employed by the learner to learn the TL or facilitate a language task” (White, 2008, p. 9). They are considered as a “set of options” chosen by the students when they observe difficulties in their learning environment, with the intention to make best use of the language and achieving their goals concerning the learning and using the target language. Oxford defined LLS as “specific actions, behaviors, steps, or techniques students use—often consciously—to improve their progress in apprehending, internalizing, and using the L2” (Oxford, 1999a, p. 1). In 2008, she wrote that “L2 learning strategies are the goal-oriented actions or steps (e.g. plan, evaluate, analyse) that learners take, with some degree of consciousness, to enhance their L2 learning” (Oxford, 2008, p. 41). Last but not least, we can cite O'Malley and Chamot, two really important figures in the field of LLS who asserted that “learning strategies are the special thoughts or behaviors that individual use to help them comprehend, learn or retain new information” (1990, p. 1).

Furthermore, some researchers, such as Ellis (1995), make a distinction between two types of strategies; language learning strategies and language use strategies. The explanation is significant since most of the studies conducted in the field of LLS refer to language learning strategies- rather than language use strategies. It should be made clear that our study focuses on language use strategies; as it refers to MA students who are competent in the English language and who make use of certain strategies so as to face the linguistic problems they encounter as students who use English throughout their academic life. Both types of strategies comprise the term L2 learner strategies, and as Cohen has indicated, learners “consciously select either to improve the learning of L2, the use of it, or both” (1998, p. 5). However, contrary to Ellis (1995) who supports the distinction between these two types, McDonough (1995) asserts a contradictory argument, according to which there is no clear-cut distinction between them neither in theory, not in practice. “A strict distinction between learning and use would imply that a learner would cease to learn when using the target language in a conversation with a native speaker or when reading newspapers. The distinction is, therefore, a matter of emphasis: learning and use can take place simultaneously with language learning strategies and language use strategies overlapping” (Pavičić Takač, 2008, p. 50).

Before we conclude this subsection with the explanation of the importance of the strategies and the presentation of the most widely accepted framework of LLS' categories, we may add a Table found on Pavičić Takač, 2008, p. 51; in order to point

the vastness of the definitions found in the literature and the confusion this may entail in disambiguating the various notions and conducting research on the issue.

1.6.3. Importance of language learning strategies

The importance of language learning strategies in our study lays in both the theoretical and methodological aspects of the field. Regarding the theoretical part, as previously stated, the field has been characterized by a relative definitional chaos and frustration. It is interesting to see how different opinions were shaped during the history of LLS. For example, Dornyei in 2005 called for the entire cancellation of the L2 learning strategy research, while simultaneously asserting the importance of their teaching to students. In contrast, Gu (2012) claimed that condemning a whole research area “is not a healthy sign” (Gu, 2012, p. 330). After some years, in 2015, Dornyei himself changed his mind, adopting a more conciliatory opinion towards LLS, however still remaining critical. So, knowing the history behind the development and the stagnation of the field is a requirement towards its understanding. In my opinion, the existence of such an important scientific field cannot be doubted if we take into account its practical extent. Abstaining from the research, we see that LLS deal with students and their improvement as language users. Thus, the importance is attributed to the learning itself and in the self-regulatory learning of the students who participate in the study in particular. Dealing with university students who use English but may sometimes use it inappropriately, the field is valuable because it paves the way through the language problems they meet and towards a solution with the help of the strategies. Reporting what they do when they meet problems in English can provide insights on other related issues, i.e. consciousness, awareness, anxiety, motivation, proficiency. Understanding all these notions through a qualitative examination based on the independent setting of the international university is something rare in the existing literature. Also, examining the LLS in a context is something relatively new as well. Seeing the strategies used to the specific language skills and related areas, i.e. grammar, vocabulary and pronunciation, we can understand which activities are more difficult for the graduate students and which strategies are more used and probably more efficient. Knowing how learners approach tasks and problems while using a language by talking about which strategies are employed, can give a general view of what students do to improve their proficiency in English. According to Fedderholdt (1997, p. 1) “the language learner capable of using a wide variety of language learning strategies appropriately can

improve his language skills in a better way”. Consequently, this can indicate the students’ ideas on their general proficiency, helping to answer the first research question of the dissertation.

1.6.4. Oxford’s classification of language learning strategies

The most widely accepted framework, Oxford’s classification, has been referred to in various studies and is widely recognizable. She created six categories of LLS; namely, cognitive, metacognitive, memory, compensation, social and affective. Direct strategies are composed of cognitive, memory and compensation strategies which “involve direct learning and use of the subject matter, in this case a new language” (Oxford, 1990, p. 11). Indirect strategies include the metacognitive, affective, and social strategies, which “support and manage language learning without directly involving the target language” (Oxford, 1990, p.135).

Cognitive strategies refer to the actions taken by the learner and enable him to comprehend and produce the target language through direct analysis or synthesis, reasoning and reorganizing of information. They are mental steps “concerned with obtaining, storage, retrieval and use of information in order to learn” (Williams & Burden, 2001 as cited in Pavičić Takač, 2008, p. 53). They are the “specific ‘attacks’ that learners employ” when faced with a learning or comprehension problem (Brantmeier, 2002, as cited in Hurd and Lewis, p. 1). Cognitive strategies such as summarizing, note-taking, outlining, grouping or classifying words or concepts and inferencing are paramount to language learning. Another group of strategies concerns the metacognitive ones. It refers to the strategies employed by the learners to plan, think about, monitor and evaluate their own cognition- their own learning. By coordinating their metacognitive knowledge they are able to observe their own learning, to discover the procedures they need to follow in order to complete the linguistic task successfully and to acquire knowledge on which strategies work better for them while they learn a language. Some more examples of metacognitive strategies found in Oxford 1990 are the following: “identifying one’s own learning style preferences and needs, planning for an L2 task, gathering and organizing materials, arranging a study space and a schedule, monitoring mistakes, and evaluating task success, and evaluating the success of any type of learning strategy”. (Oxford, 1990). Planning, selective attention and monitoring are key metacognitive strategies for second language acquisition. Depending on the task’s demands, students may plan the completion of the task

depending on its features or their goals. Selective attention mostly concerns with the early stages of L2 acquisition where the learner may find it difficult to distinguish between words and phrases' margins in speech and thus is unable to focus attention. Aiming to effective learning too, monitoring is another vital metacognitive process which helps to distinguish more effective learners from less effective learners. By monitoring, the learners can analyze the demands of the task and to manage the learning procedure. As Nisbet and Shucksmith claim, monitoring bring "mental processes under conscious scrutiny and thus more effectively under control" (1986, p. 7).

Moving with the next category to be presented, memory strategies belong to the direct strategies, with the help of which learners save and recall information. Acronyms, rhyming, forming a mental picture of a word, creating keywords, linking some information with a certain location and remembering it through that strategy are some of those, and it is important to mention that these associations made by the learners are meaningful to them.

One more group of direct strategies concerns the compensatory ways to deal with limitations in the target language (e.g., guessing from the context in listening and reading; using synonyms and "talking around" the missing word to aid speaking and writing; and strictly for speaking, using gestures or pause words). Compensation is prevalent both in the production and comprehension of a language since the learners may not be fully competent in the target language, thus becoming efficient users who are able to overcome their linguistic difficulties.

As written in O'Malley, J. and Chamot, A., (1990, p. 45), "social/affective strategies represent a broad grouping that involves either interaction with another person or ideational control over affect". By applying affective strategies the students become able to regulate their feelings, emotions, motivations and attitudes, recognizing their mood and soothing their anxiety by deep breathing and positive attitude. Self-encouragement and control of emotions undoubtedly affect the retention of the language. Last but certainly not least, social strategies are, as it can be deduced from their name, the tactics used by the learners to enhance their linguistic knowledge through active social interaction with others and make an effort to perceive the target culture; through conversations with native speakers, asking for help and asking

questions during the learning process. For example, asking questions in the target language, therefore interacting with an interlocutor through questions and responses entails communication and engagement in the conversation on the one hand and boosting the self- esteem and confidence of the student on the other, leading to a notably greater use of the language.

1.6.5. Major themes to be addressed

Considering that our study concerns a socially situated research which involves the examination of strategies, it forms a narrative of master students who employ linguistic strategies to overcome problems they meet in English detected in the academic contexts of the international university. At this point we may present the occurring themes of contextualization, teachability and proficiency related to the concept of the strategies which are integral parts of our study. Contextualization is significant because all the strategies reported appear in the contexts of certain activities taking place in the university, for example the students are asked to present the strategies they employ when they face problems in academic writing. The notion of the teachability of the strategies from a teacher to a group of learners, or from a more successful group of learners to an other which is less successful in using the strategies is also important. In our study teachability is proposed as an effective method for language development for the students who employ less effective strategies or strategies which are not specific to L2. At last, relating the level of proficiency with the strategies used may help us draw some conclusions on our first research question on the self- perceived proficiency of the students.

Starting with the first theme, the context is an important aspect of the strategy research, however not widely investigated, since it concerns contextual elements which should be taken into account. For example, Ushioda (2009) made reference to the power of the individual, namely the power of the students as persons who make use of the strategies in different situations and relate to different circumstances; a concept defined as “the person-in-context relational view”, giving emphasis on the person, “not on theoretical abstractions” and refers to “the agency of the individual person as a thinking, feeling human being, with an identity, a personality, a unique history and background, a person with goals, motives and intention” (Ushioda, 2009, p. 220).

Regarding the teachability of the strategies, an important feature of LLS to certain theorists, “optimally helps learners to become increasingly conscious of their strategy use and more able to use relevant strategies” (Oxford, 1990 as cited in Oxford, 2017, p. 46). The aim of them when taught to learners is to help them choose among certain strategies which correspond to certain tasks and its effectiveness lies in knowing “when students learn why and when specific strategies are important, how to use these strategies, and how to transfer them to new situations” (Oxford, 1990, p. 12). It is important to note at this point the relationship between the strategy instruction and the context. Strategy instruction takes place in different contexts depending on the objectives, the materials, the procedures and the subjects of instruction, namely the students. What is more, cultural differences and influences should be taken into consideration in strategy instruction. “Learners’ culturally and personally shaped beliefs and attitudes should be considered, but these should not turn into a straightjacket that denies the possibility of change” (Oxford, 2017, p. 310). At the same time, certain needs should be taken into account and given some attention when applying strategy instruction. Sensory preferences, cognitive style, attention to specific strategies students already use, students’ interests, goals and their current level of linguistic proficiency are crucial (Oxford, 2017, p. 310).

Regarding the last one, “proficiency is an ability to do something with (use) the language, ordinarily involving years of serious study and learning of it. There need be no sharp split between learning and use in the concept of proficiency”. (Oxford, 2017, p. 36). In the already existing definitions of LLS, the topic of proficiency is not widely addressed. As stated in Oxford, 2017, it is only referred in 9% of the total definitions she examined in her study. However, this is an undoubtedly interesting notion to be taken into account since overall enhancing of the learning ability, i.e. proficiency, is considered an important aspect of LLS, as was for example, found in a study being conducted by Cohen in 2007. Its value lies also in the fact that most learners pointed the contribution the language learning strategies make in their overall learning. Combining the two sub themes presented above, it could be remarked that strategy instruction should be adapted to the linguistic level or level of proficiency of the students. However, this may be challenging if we keep in mind that some university students may be less proficient and thus less strategic than others. At this point, I would like to present the pedagogic stance, implication or one would say suggestion of our

study. Since a group of students who participated in the research, study English linguistics, therefore these students are more proficient and presumably more strategic users of the English language in comparison to the rest three groups who belong to different domains of studies, they could form a group of teachers who would “teach or assist less strategic or less proficient students” (Oxford, 2017, p. 310). Of course our specific aim is to present and examine the strategies/strategic competence used by the students in the settings of L2 skill areas (reading, writing, listening, speaking, grammar, vocabulary and pronunciation), however introducing the idea of teaching the strategies and rationalize it according to the answers the participants gave in the interviews conducted, would definitely form an interesting topic to be researched in later research designs; in the context of linguistic strategies employed by university level students whose proficiency is high enough, but where linguistic problems still occur.

1.6.6. Strategies used in context- L2 skills (Vs. traditional strategy categories)

1.6.6.1. Strategies for L2 Reading in Context

“L2 reading strategies are teachable, dynamic thoughts and behaviors that learners consciously select and employ in specific contexts to improve their self-regulated, autonomous L2 reading development for effective task performance and long-term proficiency” (Oxford, 2017, p. 272). At this point of the research paper we may present the strategies employed by independent learners to compensate for problems found in L2 reading, in order to be later compared to the ones asserted by the participants of the study. “Commonly-cited reading strategies include skimming, scanning, identifying cognates or word families, guessing, reading for meaning, predicting, questioning, rereading words, sentences or entire passages, activating general or background knowledge, making inferences, following references, separating main ideas from detail, and summarizing” (Gascoigne, C. found in Hurd and Lewis, 2008, p. 72). Researchers have studied the modes of mental processing in reading, focusing on top-down and bottom-up schemata.

“Top-down processing refers to a mode in which learners combine their own background knowledge with information they obtain from the text in order to understand the text” (Oxford, 2017, p. 274) and some of them are guessing the meaning,

predicting, skimming the text for the main idea, summarizing and monitoring understanding. The top-down processing has been positively valued and overemphasized by certain researchers who claimed that these strategies are mostly used by high-proficient learners, however it has been also criticized. Its confronters have claimed that certain top-down strategies may be used by weaker readers too; for example, “poor readers often use background knowledge for guessing words, thus engaging in top-down processing (Panat, 1997, cited in Oxford, 2017, p. 275). At the other end of the spectrum, bottom-up processing refers to the readers’ analysis of every word and phrase in order to gain comprehension. Many researchers (e.g. Anderson, 1991; Panat, 1997; Block, 1986) have compared the frequency of usage of more proficient and less proficient learners, orchestrating in that way the difference between the two processing schemata analyzed above. Anderson (1991) made a comparison between better readers and less successful readers by noting which strategies they use while they were reading. He found out that better readers used better strategies and used them more effectively, noting the importance of knowing how to use a strategy sufficiently. Later in 2003, he suggested (Anderson 2003) that there is not a clear cut distinction between the ESL and EFL concepts in relation to reading anymore. As the world becomes more globalized, the process of learning how to read is similar in the second language and the foreign language contexts. Panat (1997) criticized the emphasis given on the top-down schema as it may be a compensatory strategy used by weak learners and not a goal to be achieved. Block (1986), examined the comprehension strategies used by university students as they were reading texts from a college textbook and found out that awareness is a characteristic of less successful students, as those were the students in the study who were thinking how to solve the problem they met as they read. Also, the comprehension strategies employed by them have not reached the level of automaticity which characterizes more proficient learners. Implications for teaching the strategies are discussed in the study.

However, the aim of our investigation, as already noted, is to refer to the self-reported strategies of the study’s participants and to offer a pedagogic implication according to which strategy instruction can play a vital role in the improvement of the strategy use and the development of the linguistic proficiency, leading to more autonomous behaviors.

1.6.6.2. Strategies for L2 Writing in Context

The same applies to the strategies aiming to develop the writing skills which seem to support the listening and the reading comprehension at the same time. It seems that writing in L2 receives a blur description, so our aim is that students and independent learners- the university context perfectly fits this description- “receive awareness and are armed with appropriate writing strategies specific to second language” (Bloom, 2008, p. 106). “As Petric and Czarl (2003) note, research on second language writing strategies, is relatively scant” (as cited in Bloom, 2008, p.107), and mostly deals with the writers’ strategic behavior, compares less and more experienced writers and it examines the effect of the L1 in the L2 writing. Another critical point in research LLS in writing is the difficulty to define the writing task. However, in our research this obstacle is overcome since the task under examination is the composition of an essay for academic purposes, hence writing related to creating formal written communication. The presentation of the strategies addresses the stages of pre-writing, writing and revising, as introduced by Petric and Czarl in 2003.

In the first stage, the cognitive strategies the independent learners can use are “resourcing, elaboration and grouping” (Bloom, 2008, p. 108). In the writing stage, the strategies proposed by researchers who have investigated the topic are connected to the problem-solving behavior of the learners, therefore strategies like rereading, substitution and strategic use of the L1. The last stage refers to strategies connected to self-assessment. By assessing their own writing through “rewriting, replacing or rearranging the components of an existing written product with the intention of improving the content and the linguistic accuracy” (Bloom, 2008, p. 107, 108) the learners may benefit and create more cohesive written products. What is more, proofreading, using bilingual dictionaries, attending to grammatical accuracy are strategies aiming to successful L2 writing.

In a study conducted by Sasaki (2002), after the L2 learners were asked to explain their writing-related thinking, it was found that planning strategies were paramount to the writing process, as it produces better results in L2 writing. Except for the planning strategies, self-regulated strategies seem to have tremendous implications to better writing results. “Strategies analyzed with writing tasks included advanced

planning and elaboration, restatement, and revision of the goals and sub-goals of the assignment” (O'Malley, J. and Chamot, A., 1990, p. 106). It should be noted at this point that some strategies regarding L2 and presented in this section can also be easily adopted in the L1 usage, and do not necessarily refer to linguistic strategies, but rather organizational and structural. One would say though, that the use of organizational strategies can be used to compensate for the second language problems since they may be the only resource available for the students to cope with any problems. This management from the part of the students leads anyway to their better usage of L2, i.e., in our case, English.

1.6.6.3. L2 strategies for Listening, Speaking, Grammar and Vocabulary

Listening strategies are a crucial part of L2 development. Highly related to speaking since speaking competence depends on listening competence, the aim is to refer to some previous studies on the L2 listening strategies and to present some self-regulated strategies for that particular skill. Starting with the previous research, in 1989 O'Malley, Chamot and Kupper investigated the listening strategies used by more effective and less effective L2 listeners. It was found that more effective listeners used the top-down approach and inference relatively more. They also employed self-monitoring, usage of background knowledge and they used to redirect their attention when their concentration was lost. The notion of self-instruction in listening and speaking strategies was investigated by Oxford and Ma in 2014. Rui Ma, a doctoral student noted in a diary the problems she encountered in listening and speaking strategies, explicitly read and taught herself new strategies, which led to more successful communicative events and more positive self-perception. The most effective listening strategies, as found in Oxford 2014, p. 294 are the following: “strategies that develop attention, strategies for rapidly parsing what someone hears, strategies for activating and applying prior knowledge and for focusing in order to confirm or disconfirm interpretations, planning ahead, knowing what to listen, and knowing how to respond as a listener”.

Moving on with speaking and oral communication strategies used by highly proficient English users found in previous research, Kawai (2008) found that planning and oral practice are important along with seeking help from native speakers, waiting for the comments of the interlocutor and trying to speak in English every day. Related

are the strategies which help to develop appropriate pronunciation, those being practicing, noticing when someone makes mistakes, working until reaching the desired articulation and intonation -according to someone's standard of good accent. Also, motivating oneself to reduce the stress when producing speech in front of others can influence pronunciation proficiency.

Regarding the areas of grammar and vocabulary in our study, they cannot be examined independently from the context since students deal with them continuously in every task. As for the strategies in grammar, we can refer to the students trying to find opportunities to practicing structures in different ways or practicing structures with peers. Also, asking the teacher to repeat something non- understood and correcting erroneous structures are also possible ways of dealing with grammar problems, but not very related to the self-regulation process as the professor is also part of the process. Learning vocabulary in a contextualized way means to know the vocabulary of the subject area, to guess from the context, to use dictionaries, to create mental connections among words and concepts. For Moir and Nation (2008, p. 171), important are the "mnemonic techniques, especially the keyword technique". Also, trying to understand the meaning of words from reading or aiming to learn new vocabulary through reading are typical strategies since in that way, the syntactic, semantic and pragmatic representations of the words are visible to the learner.

1.6.7. Cross-linguistic perspective on strategies

If we examine the language learning strategies from a cross-linguistic perspective, Harrington (1987) investigated how three groups of learners (Japanese learners of English, native speakers of Japanese and native speakers of English), used sentence comprehension strategies in reading. He discovered that the Japanese learners of English used the same strategies used by the native speakers of Japanese, indicating a strong relation between the L1 and the L2. Their use of L2 strategies was triggered by their L1 rather than the L2. On the other hand, in the study conducted by McDonald (1987), Dutch learners of English and American learners of Dutch participated and it was found that the L2 learners with lower proficiency used the same strategies used in their native language, while the ones with higher proficiency used strategies employed by the target language users.

Chapter 2 METHODOLOGY

2.1 Introduction to research

In this dissertation, I am interested in investigating how MA university students perceive their own proficiency in English, what linguistic problems they meet and what language learning strategies they employ to compensate for those. My small-scale study consists of two types of qualitative data, namely individual semi-structured interviews with MA university students and document analysis, both pursued in order to obtain as much information as possible to answer my research questions and also in order to determine the validity of my research methods, thus for triangulation purposes.

2.1.1. Research approach and design

In order to address the complex questions, I pursued a sequential multimethods research design by conducting interviews and gathering the students' personal descriptions on their MA theses; trying in that way to see how they use written English for a formal purpose and examine to what extent their personal thoughts on their proficiency suit their actual competence. It is true that this method of collecting data has its limitations since it only refers to the written mode of language, but on the other hand it is an effort to see the congruence between their ideas and their skills. According to Hesse-Biber (2010), "the term "multimethods" refers to the mixing of methods by combining two or more qualitative methods in a single research study (such as in-depth interviewing and participant observations) or by using two or more quantitative methods in a single research study". (p. 3)

The most suitable and effective research methodology to investigate the particular subject was to analyze qualitative data collected from qualitative research interviews which "attempt to understand the world from the subject's points of view, to unfold meaning of their experiences, to uncover their lived world prior to scientific explanations" (Brinkmann and Kvale, 2015, p. 3). As they argue, "in an interview, knowledge is constructed in the inter-action between the interviewer and the interviewee" (p. 4). The qualitative research interview seeks to describe the meanings of central themes in the life world of the subjects. The main task in interviewing is to understand the meaning of what the interviewees say (Kvale, 1996). Since the 1980s,

however, qualitative methods, from observations to interviews to discourse analysis have created a movement in research methodology. My research aimed to reveal the perceptions on the topics described above of 20 graduate students in Catholique Université de Louvain, through a phenomenological approach. According to Brinkmann and Kvale (2015), phenomenology's objective in qualitative research is to understand a phenomenon from the subject's point of view, taking into account that reality is of importance the way a person perceives it, and in contrast to quantitative research methods, "it works with words and not with numbers" (p. 33). What kind of English are the students expected to use in certain situations in the context that they are graduate students? What if they use "broken" English? Do they feel that the institution evaluates them in a strict way? And so, is there a difference for them in using English as a lingua franca and so, for communicative reasons and using academic English? Regarding what constitutes the second research question aims at investigating what problems in English language these students meet while "demanded" or expected to be proficient in English as graduate students in the international university and what strategies they use to overcome them.

Various critiques against interviewing may link its origin to simple, everyday conversation, thus simplistic, however, if designed and performed carefully, it "can become an art" (Brinkmann and Kvale, 2015, p. 19). If the knowledge acquired is perceived as mere description of experiences and events it is undermined in *doxa*, namely the condition where there is no justification or questioning of an event. In order for the knowledge to acquire its objective character so as to be considered scientific, it should turn into *episteme*, which promotes the knowledge which is justified in a discussion and eliminates the subjectivity. Even if this is not feasible in the case of our study since the subjects' reality cannot be perceived as objective or universal, however it is nurtured by a sociological approach according to which the subjective reality of individuals matters, even if it's not objective reality per se.

After the interviews were conducted, the students were asked to provide me with a short description of their MA thesis in order for me to be able to control the conformity of their writings with standard English and possibly examine their level of proficiency in English; thus to be able to examine if the statements made in their interviews regarding their perceptions on their level of proficiency correlate with their

actual writing performance; thus for triangulation purposes with the combination of primary and secondary sources of research. The most widely referred reason why researchers use mixed methods in their research is for triangulation purposes or else methods triangulation; “the combination of methodologies in the study of the same phenomenon.” (Denzin, 1970, p. 291) or as Hesse-Biber (2010, p. 3) argues, “it refers to the use of more than one method while studying the same research question in order to “examine the same dimension of a research problem” (Jick, 1979, p. 602 as cited in Hesse-Biber 2010). Triangulation contributes to the credibility of the research findings and helps the researcher gain a fuller understanding of the research problem and obtain more definite conclusions; thus for “cross-validation” (Yauch & Steudel, 2003, p. 466).

Regarding some practical aspects of the research, due to lack of professional equipment, such as an mp3 or type recorder, the interviews were recorded with my mobile phone, which was actually a sufficient tool to cover the needs of this research project. According to Richards (2003, p. 178) the equipment was tested when a pilot interview took place to examine the distance between the recorder and the interviewee and to examine the extent that any external noises may affect the recording result. Another issue which was taken into account is the “observer’s paradox” (Richards, 2003, p. 178), referring to the fact that when the observer is present “the other actors do not act in the same way as they would if they were not there. The same applies to a microphone: if people know it’s there, they don’t act normally” (Richard, 2003, p.179). However, as he further comments, in order for the participants to become familiar with it and express themselves without hesitation, they should let it “become part of the furniture” (Richards, 2003, p. 179).

2.2. Ethical issues

Ethical issues are common throughout the procedure of interview research because of the critical situation of “researching private lives and placing accounts in the public arena” (Birch, Miller, Mauhner, & Jessop, 2002, p. 1). The topics traditionally discussed and taken into consideration by researchers who conduct an interview study are: “informed consent, confidentiality, consequences, and the role of the researcher” (Brinkmann and Kvale, 2015, p. 91). Regarding the students who participated in the study, just after our first talk and a brief description of the purpose and the procedures of the investigation, I informed them that their anonymity would definitely be preserved

throughout the project and I encouraged them to withdraw at any point of discomfort they would possibly feel. In all respects, their verbal and written consent was obtained, a necessary formal step to be taken prior to the interviews, since “research with human participants is an intrusive process” (Lewis et al., 2002, p. 3) and their rights to confidentiality should be protected. As Kvale and Brinkmann (2015, p. 93) state, “informed consent entails informing the research participants about the overall purpose of the investigation and the main features of the design, as well as of any possible risks and benefits from participation in the research project”. Abiding by the guidelines of ethical research the consent forms were sent to the interviewees by email and signed by them some days before the project started.

2.3 Preparing for the data collection

2.3.1. Designing the data collection process

Why qualitative interview research is considered as method? Following the original Greek meaning, method is “the way to a goal”, “the pursuit of knowledge”. However, nowadays method is linked to a discipline that deals with the principles and techniques of scientific inquiry. “A method is a set of rules, which can be used in a mechanical way to realize a given aim. The mechanical element is important: a method shall not presuppose judgment, artistic or other creative abilities” (Elster, 1980, p. 295). In order for the researcher to make good use of the method and direct to the production of quality knowledge, he should be able to combine his skills, knowledge and thoughtfulness while researching. According to Mills (1959/2000), becoming a craftsman means to “avoid any rigid set of procedures, to avoid the fetishism of method and technique, to let every man be his own methodologist, to let theory and method become part of the practice of a craft (Mills, 1959/2000, p. 224). As a “craftsman” or more accurately a craftswoman myself, respecting the goal set to be investigated and by employing my skills, knowledge and thoughtfulness, I created a semi-structured research interview guide -whose copy is provided in the appendix- focusing on the subjects perceptions on their proficiency in English. While developing the interview guide I took into consideration the research questions and what I wanted to learn from the participants. Thinking about the previous or redundant knowledge on the subject is important too, so as to establish a niche and cover the gap in already existing research. The interview guide used for this study was made up of questions about basic demographic

information in order to break the ice and create an atmosphere of comfort between the participant and me, and also to introduce the topic of investigation and general inquiry. After the demographics, some basic questions, more general in their scope, having as a purpose to open up the topic, were introduced. Then, these questions were succeeded by follow-up questions or probes in cases that the students' responses were short or not very detailed, in order to perform a more systematic examination on the inquiry; to request for further information. The interview guide can be found at the end of this dissertation, in Appendix II.

Semi-structured interviews, a type of interviews that “allows depth to be achieved by providing the opportunity on the part of the interviewer to probe and expand the interviewee's responses” (Rubin & Rubin, 2005, p. 88) was the most appropriate type of interviewing to be used in this study. The interview guide created consisted of a list of questions which were written down in order to organize my thoughts and form a particular structure to be followed during the interviews, rather than to adhere to it. This type of organization “allows for in-depth probing while permitting the interviewer to keep the interview within the parameters traced out by the aim of the study” (Berg, 2007, p. 39). For the purpose of this study, I opted for this type of interviews as it would allow me to cover the basic topics under investigation in a struttred way and at the same time in cases where the participants were laconic or not specific, I could ask them follow-up questions which were not included in the interview guide, going “off-script”, trying to evoke responses which would supplement their former answers and help me get a clear statement from them. I was “keen to follow up interesting developments and to let the interviewee elaborate on various issues” (Dörnyei, 2007, p. 136). Thus, the interview guide stood as a helpful tool to make the plot of the research and consult it, rather than blindly follow it.

The core body of the interview guide consisted of 3 groups of main questions. The first one addressed in detail their perceptions on what constitutes the idea of proficiency in English and their views on their individual proficiency in English, their ideas about the English linguistic skills they are asked or demanded to possess as students of an international university. Is it mostly English as a lingua franca or standardized English that they use in different contexts of their academic lives? Regarding the second group of questions, asking them about what linguistic problems

they meet in English gave me a detailed description of the difficulties they meet in various skills and situations. The third group of questions touched the topic of language learning strategies used to compensate for the linguistic problems referred to in the second group of questions. Borrowing an adequate number of strategies from the SILL (Strategy Inventory for Language Learning) questionnaire designed by Rebecca Oxford in 1990 helped me obtain a clear and specific overview of the strategies used by the students when they use English in their academic careers. At this point it is crucial to explain why I did not administer the questionnaire instead. The fundamental purpose of this study was to collect and examine the perceptions and ideas of the students regarding the topics under investigation in a form of a discussion, rather than in a numerical representation of those. Administering the questionnaire would be a valid method which would undoubtedly extract results derived from their opinion and understanding too, but it would also be possible that they would “tick the boxes” of the strategies the participants think are more relevant or correct or valid, rather than the ones they truly use. Talking in detail about how -through certain strategies- they face problems they meet in English provided the interviews with indubitably truthful insights.

2.3.2. Sampling process

Since the beginning of my research where I chose to investigate the perceptions of graduate students on the role and impact of English in their lives, I considered that it would be a good idea that the participants come from various domains of studies who take classes in English. However, in order to avoid employing a random sample which would possibly entrench the issues of reliability, validity, trustworthiness, quality and rigor, the sample chosen was purposive; referring to the selection of information-rich cases. By selecting five students from four different academic disciplines who attend MA courses in English, namely political sciences, law, engineering and English linguistics, I thought it would be likely that they exemplify patterns of inquiry in this study. So, the criteria for the sampling procedures were that the students are MA students in UCL who attend classes in the English language in one of the four disciplines referred above and are not native speakers of English. The varieties in the groups also aim at depicting an image of the diversity of the situation and the different points of view.

In particular, the first step was to make sure that these departments in UCL offer classes in English which mainly address international students. The students who participated in the study were mostly students who contacted me after seeing a post I had uploaded in the Erasmus Facebook page of UCL -an informal webpage students use to advertise events and share thoughts and comments- explaining the aim of the research and asking for some participants for my MA thesis. The students' interest to participate was genuine, thinking that this is "an important thing to look for". An extra point should be made for the group of students who study English linguistics. This group of students was selected to participate as they were my classmates in most of the classes at the linguistics department. The research refers to issues of proficiency in English, language learning problems and language learning strategies, so I considered important the thoughtfulness of their statements and the depth of the details of their sayings, since they are the mostly exposed group in English and nonetheless well-qualified and specialized to be students of English linguistics. The aim of this research was to compare and contrast the responses of the different groups of interviewees, and to critically address and evaluate certain concepts and personal opinions.

2.3.3. Piloting the interview

Testing the interview guide was a key step in the process of obtaining the data. It is important when creating the interview guide to make sure that the questions noted down are useful enough and are going to obtain thorough responses from the interviewees. Practicing asking the questions was the first tread to move with after creating the interview guide with the aim to examine if it covers the two key features of the "good" interview; which according to Dörnyei (2007, p. 140) are that: "(a) it flows naturally, and (b) it is rich in detail". By this stage I already had a good idea of most of the questions that I wanted to ask and of the main question categories that I wanted to include in the interview guide. However, the questions had to be tested before finalizing the guide to gain an in-depth insight into the topic through the answers of the first interviewee. The "experimental" participant was a former student of linguistics who had finished her master's degree at the end of the previous academic year. The answers produced by the questions administered to her were fruitful and relevant to the focus of my research. However, some of the questions included in the interview guide were slightly reformed, becoming more specific, while others were placed in a different

category. It is important to state at this point that since the interviews addressed four groups of students who studied in different departments- including students who studied linguistics- some of the questions which entailed “special” terminology, e.g. the term bilingual, had to be defined or further explained in order for all the students to have a clear understanding of their meanings.

2.4 Data collection process

2.4.1. Interviews

The interviews with the students lasted 10 days. I was conducting 2 interviews per day, having scheduled our appointment with each interviewee in a quiet room beforehand. I encouraged all the participants to feel relaxed and express their views freely. During the first minutes of the interviews -which lasted approximately 20 to 30 minutes- most of them were hesitant and quite laconic, but after some positive interaction between us they started being really communicative and expressive. They were willing to help me disambiguate the concepts and offered me valuable input based on their perceived relationship with the English language. In order for the information gathered to be organized and the data obtained to be detailed, I grouped the questions and classified them in certain situations that would be familiar to them, so by asking questions referring to specific contexts of their performance as international students who study in English or certain skills, would make the data more detailed and the information systematized even from the early stage of data collection. At the end of our discussion they declared their excitement on the topic’s potential; on how it is an effort to listen to the student’s voices on the matter which tries to examine the association between the term “proficiency” and how English is used in today’s university and some practical issues referring to certain linguistic problems and strategies. Listening to the students’ ideas on how they apprehend their level in English and what this further entails in their daily lives as MA students signifies an effort to observe the reality and re-examine the normative discourses on the topic.

2.4.2. Students’ notes

As referred in section 3.1.1., after the completion of the 20 interviews, the students were asked to further contribute to the exploratory procedure by writing a ten-line description of their MA research project. 14 students actually provided me their notes. This task

was assigned to serve a dual scope; triangulation of the data being the first and language skills assessment being the second, however it is always important to keep in mind the small sample of student notes. By conducting language skills assessment to the written documents they sent me, the objective was to assess their proficiency according to the norms of standard English and by collecting more data on the same topic helped me cross-validate their initial oral statements and gain a better understanding of the investigated phenomenon, but from a different angle.

2.5 Limitations of the research design

Conducting a study by using multi methods can yield positive results in the research procedure, however it can also have its limitations. Trying to compare and contrast the findings that were collected through interviews and students' notes is particularly time-consuming, a relatively necessary element for Nancarrow who states that "a penetrating qualitative research demands time and persistence. We cannot demand, who we do research, that everything should be geared toward minimizing time" (Nancarrow, 2005, as cited in Kvale and Brinkmann, 2015, p. 336, 337). With regard to the particular research project, apart from interviews and student notes, administering questionnaires and thus conducting a mixed- method research would be a fruitful alternative, since it would definitely add validity to the results of the study. However, the reasons why I chose not to conduct quantitative research were adduced above. In addition to those and by taking into account the scope of the study which is nonetheless a small-scale one, implementing a quantitative tool in the research design would make the research non-manageable.

Chapter 3 DATA ANALYSIS 1ST PART

3.1. Introduction

This chapter aims at presenting the findings from the interviews and the results by dividing them in relevant themes which were adopted by Xu and Van de Poel's (2011) and Luccacini's (2015) studies about English as a lingua franca in Flanders and Wallonia respectively. It is important to state that the students were firstly grouped according to their field of studies -political science, engineering, law, linguistics- since their overall answers were more or less comparable and as it seems they depend on how they use English as students of a specific field of studies. The cases that refrained from the majority or their answers were open to a different interpretation will be further commented.

Starting with the first research question, the data which seem to answer it will be presented in order to be further analyzed. After the presentation and discussion of the notes, the second part of the interviews which actually gives an answer to the second research question will be presented and analyzed. Some discussion and comments on the connection of the two research questions will follow, and in the last section the students' notes will be presented and discussed in order to discover whether their self-perceived proficiency is reflected in their own writing. Of course this method entails a number of limitations as it only reveals how students use English in the written form and cannot depict their ideas on the whole, and what is more, only half of the students delivered the notes to me, probably because they were asked to do so some time after we conducted the interviews. This may mean that some of them did not want to be further engaged with this research and spend more time on that. However, the positive aspect is that I was given the opportunity to double check their sayings by examining their writings too. The reason why I choose to firstly present and discuss the finding regarding the first research question and then move to the presentation and discussion of the findings which refer to the second one is because all the interviews produced a massive amount of data which was of course categorized into the most important information to be discussed, but most of it yielded some really notable and crucial answers to the questions asked. Thus, each kind of result raised its own questions and called for an independent interpretation, so I considered it as the best to discuss the results just after their presentation. In a way, avoiding repetitions and delivering a clearer meaning is the utmost goal.

3.2. Data analysis and discussion of the 1st R.Q

R.Q 1: Self-perceived proficiency in English and views on English of international students in Université Catholique de Louvain.

3.2.1. Theme one: Overview of place of English in the life of international students and the perception of their proficiency.

The first group of answers given by the students during the interviews is concerned with the place of English in the students' lives and their own perception of their proficiency. After the demographics were collected, their profile was drawn upon by investigating how many years they studied in English so far, if they hold a certificate of proficiency in English and if it was required to be shown to their application to study in UCL. Also, questions about the frequency and the importance English has in their lives aimed to reveal their general orientation towards English. What is more, how the individuals rate themselves in terms of proficiency in English overall, their level of comfort while using it and possible ways they would use to potentially develop their proficiency constitute the spectrum of inquiries.

Regarding the international students who constitute the sample in our study, overall they seem to have a positive attitude towards English. Some of them studied in English for 3 or 4 years, while others for 7 or 9 years. Some of them had to provide a certificate in English along with their application to be exchange students and all of them took the Erasmus+ assessment test before the exchange period began. Regarding the frequency of using English, all the answers agreed on a catalytic "every day". The same applies to the importance that English has in their lives as all of them stated that it is very important; however, the importance lies on different reasons. For example, (S1) asserted that it is important because it is the language you use as an international student.

Extract 1 (S1): English is important, since I moved to Belgium I use it all the time. I like it a lot. It's very international. For the university also. You have to know English to be an Erasmus student. Otherwise is very difficult because you have to face all the situations in English.

For some other participants the importance of English is linked with their domain of studies. Students entitled in the MA of law and engineering said:

Extract 2 (S12): For people like me who want to study and work abroad is so significant to have a good command in English. Your status as a

lawyer is higher if you can speak an international language like English. For French it is the same for me, but I take classes now to make it better.

Extract 3 (S7): It is important to know English. It helps a lot if you want to work abroad as an engineer.

As it seems, along with the importance of English for someone who studies politics or law because all the current international events are in international tabloids and newspapers written in English or because he/she feels the need to know English as a person who deals with international political events, they also refer to the importance of English as it helps people become more international; either a student or a human being in general. S3's opinion adheres to that viewpoint too, adding that high level of proficiency in English makes one clever too.

Extract 4 (S3): It is really important. English helps me think better, have more open opinions, know myself better. It is very important to use your brain in more than one language, you become smarter and more curious. And it also maybe will give me the opportunity to work here in Belgium or in another country.

For the question about how they rate their proficiency regardless of the existence or not of a formal certificate, S1 said that since she can speak and write in English and her pronunciation is not particularly heavy, she is proficient enough. S17 rated her proficiency higher when it comes to the receptive skills, even if she studies linguistics and those students are supposedly more exposed in all the aspects of the language than the rest of the participants.

Extract 5 (S1): It's very good, I can speak very easily, I can write very easily, I don't have problems using English generally.

Extract 6 (S17): I wouldn't say that it's very high because of my exposure, but because of the receptive skills like reading and listening, I mean for the productive skills, when I have writing and speaking it's a bit difficult, it has always been more difficult.

At last, when it comes to the question seeking to comprehend the students' comfort when it comes to English usage, this group of students is generally positive. It is interesting to see though how some of them are generally positive but refer to the challenges it entails. Taking into consideration the time that passes while using English and that they can observe the positive outcomes from their exposure makes them more comfortable.

Extract 7 (S3): I try to be. It is difficult sometimes but it is a challenge so I am glad when after some time I see the progress in myself. I always try to be more and more and more comfortable.

Extract 8 (S5): Now I can say for the MA it's better but still is much more complicated than French. If I have to write for example a paper it will take me more time let's say than in French but to follow the classes is fine.

Referring to the question of how the students would potentially develop their proficiency in English, except for the more “expected” answers like “reading books or watching films or travelling abroad”- for example S18, S4 claimed that they can improve in English by writing more in English. S5 also responded accordingly.

Extract 9 (S18): I think personally it happens if you live and you are immersed in the culture. There's so much to learn when you live there. Its not just the accent, it's also all these small regional things, like we speak our native language, how we talk in our language.

Extract 10 (S4): I should write more, always better to have a synthetic way there, plus I should listen to news and music more.

Extract 11 (S5): For me the difficult is the grammar. I need to study more grammar to write correct English. So maybe I read a grammar book this summer. All these rules are so confusing.

3.2.2. Theme 2: Motivation and anxiety when learning and using English in general and in studies.

The second group of answers given by the students refers to their perceived anxiety and motivation when they have to work with English. This helps us see the students' association with the English language. Acknowledging the difficulty to define and measure the complex issue of motivation, it is only pursued through the very basic and primary understanding. So, it focused on the student's sense of association with the language. Regarding anxiety, more than half of them referred to their slight anxiety when it comes to English. Most of the responses reflect the same pattern like the following:

Extract 12 (S2): About English classes I am not anxious. Though I should be because sometimes I am too much self-confident and I just rely on my level of English and then it's all a mess haha.

Extract 13 (S5): I'm not that anxious, I think I can manage the stress. I just take some more time to do something. But that's okay. Another student declared his/her emerging calmness and obsession when it comes to accomplishing a challenge.

Extract 14 (S6): I am obsessive with things. This means that I stop doing things because I have to read. I stop living. I am so focused I stop doing other stuff. I am calm and obsessive.

We can see that the most relaxed students are the ones who belong to the political sciences and law fields of studies. On the other hand, engineers seem to be more anxious. Some students referred to the anxiety that the exams entail especially in combination with English. Some others refer to the stress that the deficiency in grammar causes.

Extract 15 (S9): Usually before the exams I'm very very nervous, I feel if the answers were in Portuguese would be easier. It doesn't come so easy in English you know.

Extract 16 (S7): Yes, I am stressed because I don't know how to speak good English. And also my grammar is the worst.

The students who emerge as the most anxious or stressed when it comes to English are the ones who study linguistics. All of them asserted various occasions or reasons to feel anxious, from speaking publicly or speaking with native speakers or because of the language itself.

Extract 17 (S16): I am definitely anxious yes. I get so blocked sometimes I really use non-correct English. I think because I have to use it all the time and in that high level myself reacts and does all the mistakes of the world.

Extract 18 (S20): I am anxious because of the language, in my home country I wasn't so nervous when I had to present something, and then I thought oh yes, it was in my language, maybe that's the reason. I am always a bit nervous, even in Portuguese, but in my language is like natural anxiety, not because of the language, after the 1st minute you get used to it and talk and talk.

The second question of the second topic investigates the students' motivation. Do they feel motivated to use English in the university? Do they want to face and develop their English? All of the students who participated in the study answered positively in this question, indicating in that way their motivation to use and develop English. Some of them referred to the "good" change they see in themselves after some time of exposure, or others referred to their first motivation to deal with the exams in which they have to show that they know

English. There is no big difference in the answers among the groups under examination. It would be interesting though to see how a student who belongs in the field of political sciences refers to herself as perfectionist. What is more, two students who study engineering referred to the same motivation to get better and learn more vocabulary to develop their competence in their field of studies. At the same respect, one student of linguistics referred to her motivation as a way to deal with the mistakes he/she makes in English. These opinions are presented in this order below.

Extract 19 (S2): About English classes I am not anxious. Though I should be because sometimes I am too much self-confident and I just rely on my level of English and then it's all a mess haha. Yes, I am perfectionist in that sense.

Extract 20 (S7): I want to get better yes, but it is difficult and it takes so much time. I want good grades in the exams so I have to read all the vocabulary in English.

Extract 21 (S8): Yes, I try to learn new words and read in English. You use English all the time if you are an engineer.

Extract 22 (16): Since I am so afraid of making mistakes I am motivated to get over that fear and finally feel like this language is a part of me. Of course, I love it but you can never totally master it.

3.2.3. Theme 3: Types of English used in the university and the focus of learning

The third topic examined the English preferred and used by the international students in the university. The vast majority of the students stated that they use or try to use formal English in their academic lives. Apparent is the differentiation in English between the situations they have to use written and spoken language. When they have to write a report or a research paper this has to happen in more formal and conventional English, with as less mistakes as possible, while when the case is speaking -even with the professors- they are more casual and do not see the mistakes they themselves or their co-speakers make. On the one hand, their general aim is to be able to adequately communicate with their interlocutors and mutual understanding is promoted; while on the other hand their effort to be “correct”, “precise” and “without mistakes” make them to orient themselves towards the more standardized varieties of English, exactly because it is one's final resort to ensure mutual understanding. Both the political sciences and law students with a couple of

exceptions in each group refer to the correct and good grammar and knowledge of the language. It is interesting to see the attitude of the only native speaker of English, who happens to study law. She asserts:

Extract 23 (S15): I think I mostly use everyday English, of course grammar and vocabulary in that certain level help a lot, but for example it is difficult to write a research paper in English for me too. I don't know if I have the right to complain and compare myself with the people who study here and have different mother languages but it is difficult. Maybe it depends on the field too, and law is particularly difficult. So, yes I struggle with writing in English.

The group of students who study engineering appear to be less oriented to the standard varieties. All of them asserted that the most important is the communication part and that they use simple English. One could automatically reflect on this statement and regard that their use of simple English does not function adequately if we take into account the formality of the academic context. Simple English is not enough for any of the academic situations the students were asked to present their opinion on. Some justify their opinion by saying that in their field they don't have to be very good at English because they mostly use terminology and math types. Along with the field justification, one can also refer to this student's low level of stressing. He explicitly states that he does not care a lot.

Extract 24 (S7): I use really simple English haha. To speak with people and to write reports. And they are really simple. That's good because I am an engineer so I don't care a lot. I don't have to write too much. Only terminology and math types.

The same idea comes in line with the S6 who asserts:

Extract 25 (S6): I use English to communicate. I don't have to know perfect English. And I don't care if I do. Of course, it is extra but the domain is very independent. Plus, I hate grammar. So, I just communicate.

On the other hand, their colleague (S10) supports a totally different point of view. In particular he states:

Extract 26 (S10): I just use very formal English because of what I study, all the articles are in good English and all the reports I have to write should be correct also. Okay when I speak with my friends it is simpler, but the vocabulary is more casual. So, when I use English at school I use good English.

At last, the students whose field of studies is linguistics make it explicit that they use- either because they are used to it, or they are supposed to- standard English. They used a lot the terms “good, correct, perfect, formal, accurate, structured, serious” to describe their state of orientation towards English, but one can understand from the interviews this orientation develops because it is supposed to be like that. All of them denoted that using standard English for the sake of using standard English or trying to sound more native does not necessarily indicate a higher level of knowledge or proficiency. However, the really interesting point to be taken into account is their concluding comments on the vast importance to be yourself, namely to sound or write and overall express in English promoting your own personal characteristics.

Extract 27 (S18): I use the English that I have to use. I mean, when I speak with my friends I just speak as I want, when I speak with a professor I have to be careful with my language. And when I read I try to see the context and the words which create it. It is very important to be aware of the way you speak and write and express yourself because this knowledge you promote and that self of yours is seen.

Extract 28 (S19): My English is mostly formal I think, English appropriate for writing. But I still cannot figure out all the phrases and the phrasal verbs and the collocations. I try also to develop my colloquial style and not sound very formal. But that's all we learn in that school. I lived in the US for 1 year so that helped a lot back then. I don't try to pass for set I am not. It's a bad idea. If you are good just keep it, otherwise drop it.

3.2.4. Theme 4: Ownership of English and interaction with native/non-native speakers.

The first question of the last theme referred to the students' opinions on who owns the English language. The majority of the students referred to everybody's ownership of English, referring to it as an international language that everyone who reads it or uses it in any situation and context is its owner. This idea reflects the English as a Lingua Franca scheme which is promoted by the students probably because they themselves use the language for their studies and other reasons, however they are not native speakers of it. It is interesting to see that even from the one student who is a native speaker -his/her background remarks his/her family's moving to the UK when he/she was in a young age.

Extract 29 (S15): That's a difficult question. Considering my background and the way I was raised and the languages that I have inside my head I strongly believe that English belongs to the one who will have it in his heart and will always try to acquire it. It's like in every language. A native person may have a certain ease at facing situations and dealing with his language but never knows the 100% of it. There must be a word or a phrase you don't know its meaning, or there may be a grammatical structure that you don't use correctly either.

However, another pattern is prevalent too. Students who referred to themselves as close to the native English model by referring to their self-perceived bilingual background stemming from their education which was mostly based on standard English seem to believe that English belongs to the native speakers of it, namely the British or the American people. These students do not belong to the same field of studies; it is observed that those three students belong to political sciences, engineering and law respectively. This pattern comes in relative opposition with the emerging scheme that students whose self-perceived proficiency in English is low enough and appear as less self-confident. These students, who once more do not belong to the same field of studies, actually refer to the native users of English as the ones who particularly own the language. This idea develops as these students use English only for a short period of time and they maybe will not have to use it if they return to their home countries after the end of their studies; unless they start working in an international company where English is the means of communication too.

Extract 30 (S2): I am certain it belongs to the native speakers of English. And that all the rest we try to imitate them and make their language ours. This is so so difficult and stupid though. But it happens. We are usually not in the mood to get better, to study more, to know better English. Just because we can speak some words we think we know the language. I'm not sure this is fair to them who know it since they are born. So, I like to speak with English speakers. The British accent is lovely. So classy haha.

Extract 31 (S9): It belongs to native people. I cannot say that it is my language, it is just the first time I use it because I have classes in English and I don't live in my country. So I just use it now. And I don't have to use it if I go back. Only if I work in an international company that they work with English.

Last but not least, students belonging to the department of linguistics referred to English as a Lingua Franca and the right of everyone to use it. Regarding the second question I addressed to them during the interview, the vast majority referred to themselves as being not bilingual. It is interesting to state that the students who study linguistics even though they said that they are not bilingual because they do not own two different languages from birth, they are highly proficient. All of them added an extra comment referring to their high knowledge and performance in English; they may not be bilingual with the traditional meaning but apparently they believe they are as competent or near-competent as a native user since they spent relatively enough time to acquire an education as linguists.

Extract 32 (S18): If you define bilingual haha!! I guess I would stick with growing up with 2 languages and you have a native like level at the same time for both. Of course, it's possible to achieve it in a later stage but I wouldn't define myself as a bilingual. Of course I am fluent but not really bilingual.

Extract 33 (S19): I think I can say I'm kinda bilingual because I am using it more even here. I always use English now.

A couple of students from other fields answered positively assuming themselves as bilinguals because of their education progress and status. They seem to be the same students who answered with conviction about them being very confident and motivated. For example, S2 said:

Extract 34 (S2): I use English since I was 18 every day of my life. So I could say yes. I'm not perfect but I'm working towards it. I think if I manage to go to London for some time then I will be 100% able to think that I am a bilingual.

In the last question of this topic, that being whether students try to sound native like or if they keep their personal characteristics when they speak in English, the vast majority asserted that they maybe try to sound more native like at the first place. They seem to like to mimic native speakers or they would like to sound so, however after some efforts they tend to give up and eventually accept their personal characteristics. Most of them also referred to their preference to sound natural, without the heavy accent for example the Italian or the German language usually carry along.

Extract 35 (S3): I love the differences among people so I always try to speak correctly in order to be understandable, but I don't want to lose my accent, I don't know why. For me it's strange when I hear a Spanish guy speaking with Cambridge accent, I respect them because maybe they know better English than me but I'm not English, so I have to be correct but my accent is my special characteristic.

Extract 36 (S13): I think I don't really try to but I think it comes through time, these 3 months I see my improvement, and it took away all my fear and I kinda created an accent, I have a friend who lived in the US so I try to be careful and I have a lot of contact with him. I think if you speak and you don't have the strong German accent isn't bad, it's always good to be more natural.

Finally, the views of the students who study linguistics are interesting to be drawn upon. They all referred to the misleading and usually stereotypical view people have on an accent in English by asserting that a person is easily judged by her accent, rather than his/her linguistic knowledge and correctness. Thus, it is more preferable to speak fluent rather than having a native accent. Speaking without hindering communication is the utmost goal. S19 characteristically says:

Extract 37 (S19): I never tried to use a British accent because it seemed fake and you sound so posh if you use it without native speakers. It's like an effort to sound British so either you do it perfectly or drop it man! I'm not sure about my accent haha, because when I say I should try harder to use British accent I say what do I try to prove with that? And then I think what kind of accent I have? Is it American? No? Do I sound like a Romanian too? And am I identified as an Eastern European? Maybe it's a mix. I'm far from having a native accent, I don't want to have it I think, sometimes I found myself in a company of British people or people who had an accent that I mimic or imitate them. It's like a reflex I can't stop it. I even do it home with Romanians so if I speak to people who have a strong accent from another region I cannot stop but imitate them. It's weird that I do it.

Extract 38 (S18): I wish I could sound like native but I'm really bad with pronunciation, so I cannot really sound native. I just like how it sounds, I really like it. For me the most important thing though is that they can understand me and they are not distracted but what I want to communicate. It was something I was really nervous about when I started working, I am really conscious about my accent, but you know people there were nice and cooperative and had no problems. They found it cute to speak with foreigners. Is it a stereotype then? I think it matters to people who are not into linguistics because to me the most important thing is that I understand a person and not the accent. But for the rest of the people it matters because it's the first and the only thing to perceive and give emphasis to prove their knowledge. Even regional accents. So, yes it's more of stereotypes but outside people who work in that field, prestige and status connected.

Chapter 4 DISCUSSION- 1ST PART

Overall, the results from the interviews conducted with the international students demonstrate the students' self-perceived proficiency in English and their personal views on the English language in the particular setting of the international university. Their self-perceived proficiency is drawn through their understanding of the norm in the English language, meaning that their viewpoints on the accepted norm consequently -and rather unconsciously- create their personal profile of proficiency. In order to make this point clear, it is crucial to illustrate the groups' general thoughts on their proficiency and their orientations towards English in the university.

Starting with the political sciences and law groups whose students' answers did not show big fluctuations in their answers, maybe because these two domains of studies are somehow related, it is shown that most of them perceive their proficiency as high enough if we take into account the majority's preference to use "correct" and "precise" English or their aim to be more formal and structured. Even the students who referred to their aim to communicate their thoughts over being structurally correct, admitted that in terms of their linguistic development they would try to learn more grammar and vocabulary to deal with the formal parts of the language. It seems that those who feel more confident and better educated in English perceive themselves as more proficient and as users of more "correct" and "good" English. These characteristics pertain to the standard realizations of the English language, those being the British and the American varieties. In accordance with it, the students who understand that their English is not so good, or that they simply communicate their thoughts are observed to be less proficient than their colleagues. This is shown through their sayings and through their reserved opinion about themselves. They seem less confident and apparently they tend to show high levels of respect towards the standard varieties of English, which again stand as the point of reference in their statements.

The group of students who are enrolled in the master degree of engineering appears to be less formally oriented in its totality. Those students' fundamental aim is to adequately communicate with their interlocutors and to use English in a way that

does not hinder communication. It can be assumed that they perceive themselves as less proficient and not very comfortable with the more difficult or demanding activities, i.e. writing reports, as most of them refer to their disgrace towards grammar. However, instead of low confidence, one would relate their lower proficiency with their low interest in actually acquiring the more formal aspects of the language; as a response to the fact that they do not really need to be correct in English since they are engineers who write reports with standard terminology or math types. Thus, according to them, they do not really need to be highly proficient in that sense. Of course there were instances of students who referred to their efforts to become more correct and they all made a reference to their will to develop their competence in various ways, some of them being to learn more grammar and read more to acquire a bigger vocabulary in English. It is interesting to see how this group too expressed their admiration towards the native realizations of English.

The last group of students that participated in the study, the students of linguistics, referred to themselves as proficient but they did not seem to believe that they are the most proficient users of the language. They use the language in mostly formal ways by trying to speak and write normal English, thus by using the language accurately, however they come to the forefront as more open to other ways of using it, more tolerant in accents which do not match with the canonical ones and more aware to perceive language as a way to express yourself in the best way, rather than to imitate and adopt a certain model. Viewing their perspective in accordance to the other groups' answers and taking into account their -in a sense- professional occupation with English and their advanced linguistic skills since this is the content of their domain of studies, it seems that they are just confident with how they deal with the language. If we place all the students' perceptions of proficiency and confidence in a continuum, there appears that the students of linguistics and the students who study political sciences and law find themselves in a more or less similar or equivalent level, with the linguists accepting their differences from the native speakers more openly than the students in political sciences and law. This can be rendered as a paradox if the students' of linguistics status and level of knowledge in English is taken into account. In opposition, instead of showing their face as more arrogant and as real users of English, they are aware of the challenges it entails to use it correctly and they make it clear that English belongs to everyone who is willing to use it and that one's accent is not a sign of real

proficiency and knowledge, but what has been stuck as a stereotypical idea in people's minds who listen to someone with a British or American accent and perceive it as ideal.

After all, the students' level of proficiency can be perceived or rated by them when they think about the years of education they received in English, their personal commitment to reach a particular level, their ideological stance towards what kind of English should be used in the academic setting and as a consequence in a future professional environment, their levels of anxiety and motivation too. As Takahashi (2008) found, there is a positive correlation between the self-perceived proficiency and the actual performance. Motivation plays an important role towards it. However, other affective factors -plus the levels of facilitating anxiety- have an impact on one's proficiency. In our study, this refers to the students who face anxiety but use it in a positive and motivational direction.

Thus, visible is the participants' tendency to accept English as a Lingua Franca on the macro-level. Regarding the contexts of use and the importance of English in the students' lives, it is highly important both for personal and for academic purposes, used as a tool which promotes the communication among native and non-native users of English and even more it enables them to acquire some or the whole of their master degrees through it. All these of course originate from the globalization, that being economic, technological, cultural, linguistic and the sociolinguistic realities English has created with its prevalence and ubiquity. Regarding the linguistic advancement, it is undoubtedly realized in the international university nowadays as more emphasis is put on the functional aspects of the language which bring along and promote the notions of the tolerance of the diversity and the acceptance of the differences in linguistic production, especially in the setting of the students' mobility from their home to the host university. Thus, one could say that consequently, less emphasis is given on the standard forms of English as it does not serve the higher goal of the communication promoted by ELF. As Soler (2007) says there is "a process of language choice at different levels which enable speakers to maintain their native language and cultural identity, but at the same time being able to use a different language as an instrument to understand each other" (Soler, 2007, p. 29). The language which undoubtedly serves as such an instrument is English. This situation is practically described if one considers

the students' desire to keep one's own culture and identity, on the one hand, and the ambition to become better and compete internationally, on the other". As one can possibly assume the task to be an international student who faces situations and different linguistic realizations is hard to balance and needs an amount of commitment and certain choices to be made. It seems that the majority of the students face this ambition to excel and compete internationally as a serious situation in terms of the language they use. They do not simply adhere to the tool they have in their hands, namely ELF, to deal with their academic lives, but they tend to go beyond and seek correctness and accuracy over simple communication. Hence, what is observed is an emphasis on the native or standard variety of English in the micro-level since it is the students' goal of learning or ideal linguistic level to perceive; along with a unconscious but clear to me reservation from their side to abstain from the standard English norm.

That inference emerges if we take into account some more of the students' opinions on the matter; for example, how they perceive their accent in relation to native English or their answers in the question if they feel bilingual. The majority of them responded negatively in the question of whether they are bilingual or not and very strictly they characterized their accent as non-native, clearly differentiating themselves from it and feeling guilty for the times they tried to sound more native-like, as if it something morally bad. The possible explanation to be given could be that they feel emotionally vulnerable on the basis of the standard native norm. From the exploration, their sense of inferiority can be referred in relation to British or American people. This undoubtedly affects their sense of identity as competent users of the language but still non native and there can we place their sense of high responsibility towards the standardization and preference for accuracy.

For example, that is exactly how the students of linguistics perceive themselves; on the one hand, they are non-native speakers of English, but on the other hand, they learn and acquire the language in an academic and in the future professional level, studying it from a perspective that a native speaker would possibly not have acquired, however they are still differentiating themselves from being bilingual. It is nevertheless interesting to take a look at their explanations asserting that both their non-bilingualism and non-native accent are compensated by their high level of proficiency, their fluency and high competence; along with their openness towards the use of English by

everyone; usually coming in contradiction with the rest of the groups, which conceive and describe the matters as more binary. It seems after all, that the burden and the difficulty to disambiguate the matter resonates in the so far stereotypical ideas English has carried along with its existence, the belief and identity systems developed so far in relation to it.

It is important to refer at this point to the idea that in the setting of higher education nowadays “the illusion of a linguistically homogeneous English native-speaking group becomes impossible to maintain. And with such diversification, it also becomes more obvious that no one speaker, native or otherwise, could achieve a “complete competence” in the English language”. And so, reproducing the native ideal is a stereotypical construction which promotes an obsolete authority. However, as stated in the literature review, in the context of academia, where people have to be precise and accurate in meaning and form, the compliance with the norm is necessary. Understanding one’s proficiency in English by firstly understanding the norm was an empirical question to be answered through the research conducted, which comes to the conclusion that in the midst of the ELF phenomenon and “since English has acquired such major symbolic capital, it is important to evolve strategies to resist linguistic hegemony and symbolic imperialism: what has to be done is to become proficient in English without being brainwashed.

Chapter 5 DATA ANALYSIS- 2ND PART

5.1. Introduction

Moving to the second research question, we will refer to the problems the master students face when they use English in the academic setting and the strategies they deploy to deal with them; their answers will be presented below and conclusions will be drawn according to the profile they display. It should be stated that both the problems and the strategies were placed and examined in relation to the four learning skills, i.e. writing, speaking, reading, listening and sub-skills, i.e. grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation, so that their better grouping and understanding to be promoted even from the phase of the interviews. Also, as stated in the previous section the students are categorized in four groups, depending on their field of studies.

5.2. R.Q 2: Problems in skills in academia and usage of strategies by the students.

5.2.1. Theme 5: Problems and strategies in academic writing, in doing academic presentations, in participating in group project with classmates, in attending classes, in reading academic papers.

5.3. Academic Writing

Starting with the skill of writing, in the academic context it is perceived as academic writing. The vast majority of the students referred to the same problems in writing, those being problems in grammar, vocabulary and structuring. For example, S2 claimed:

Extract 1 (S2): ...yea I think I find vocabulary difficult. And grammar sometimes too, I struggle but now I struggle because I have this mix of languages in my head, and sometimes I find it difficult to orient myself.

Also, S10 said:

Extract 2 (S10): I think I'm better in grammar because they are just rules you have to follow, but yea vocabulary is the thing you develop with the passing of time and you can write same things in different ways.

Most of the students' answers were more explicit when they described their problems in vocabulary and in dealing with it, rather than grammar; meaning that they talked more about specific issues in lexis and in the structure of the paper, rather than more problematic traits in grammar. They referred to grammar in more general terms and in

the difficulty to master it in its totality. Thus, their claims to the strategies used to deal with grammar are limited.

Starting with the group of students studying political sciences, it seems that they mostly refer to problems of organizing their academic papers in terms of how to express the difficult ideas entailed in their field- thus which words to use in order for their ideas to be adequately presented- and problems in grammar. For example S2 and S3 claim:

Extract 3 (S2): I think it is vocabulary, because when you read a particular topic you have to know very well the vocabulary, and then in order not to bush around and say important, crucial, you have to be precise and use the terminology and definitions and terms, so yes sometimes the vocabulary is difficult. Of course still because it's not my langue maternelle (mother language: translation from French), so yea I think I find vocabulary difficult.

Extract 4 (S3): For me writing is difficult. It's easier to organize the reading because I have a specific way to do it, it is easy to find the books, but it is not easy to analyze the different sources and write something. The most difficult part is to put together all these sources, to try to link between the different subjects. And for me even reading is difficult because all the sentences in political sciences are long and the ideas are very complex. For me grammar is also hard because my level is not high. So then the problem is general. It starts from reading something and then is general. It is in vocabulary and grammar and the ideas.

So, problems connected to the choice of the “right” word to be used in a particular topic in order for the student to be precise and the knowledge of the relevant for the course terminology and definitions are of paramount importance. In order to solve these problems, students in political sciences resort to better planning and organization of their ideas when they have to write an academic essay. Grouping their ideas in a more adequate manner and paraphrasing what they read in the scientific resources appear to be effective ways towards better academic writing for them. Another practical advice taken from them is that they consult dictionaries or in many cases Google translate to understand the meaning of unknown words and to find some synonyms in order to use them interchangeably. For that matter S1 comments:

Extract 5 (S1): Of course I use dictionaries online finding words, and then I think I am good at connecting the essays with connecting words. I don't know what else. Maybe because I read articles or books, I have the idea in my mind and then just rephrasing the ideas, I don't think it's so difficult for me to do it. Of course I use Google translate or

dictionaries online. Usually about synonyms , because I can't use the same word 10 times, so yea I have to find something else.

For the same matter (S3) says:

Extract 6 (S3): And with vocabulary when I have problems I put the Italian word in a website and it's automatically translated. I mark all the sentences and words I have to know and I check them when I finish reading. I have to learn little by little the new words.

Also, as effective strategies to deal with the stress that writing an academic paper implies, S3 refers to his/her technique to place himself in an environment where he feels relaxed and as comfortable as possible. In addition, he states as helpful tricks the creation of a small study group with a person that he studies together with and finally, if things get difficult and he cannot orient himself towards writing adequately an academic paper he resorts in arranging an appointment with the professor with the aim to ask questions on the matter. It should be noted, however, that these strategies are not specific to linguistic problems, but rather strategies which help students to relax and deal with the L2 more effectively.

Extract 7 (S3): Mostly I try to find a nice place to read where I feel relaxed and I know how to calm myself. Then I google everything I don't know or I try to ask my professors. But usually I don't want to be annoying so I have a small study group with my friend. So we read together and talk about these ideas.

It is interesting to refer to the group of students who study law and the fact that they seem to employ the same -more or less- strategies with their colleagues at the department of political sciences when it comes to face problems in grammar and vocabulary. Except for referring again on dictionaries, Google translate and planning before writing, this group of students refers more on how to better acquire a grammatical phenomenon by resorting to grammar books, checking the grammatical structures online or memorizing; and also they refer more on the importance to write using "correct" English and practice writing in order to become better.

Extract 8 (S12): I plan it, I structure it, I summarize some ideas from my research, then I start writing it, of course I keep notes about the sources and everything. Grammar is a bit difficult because I have to use correct English but I check the structures I need online, and vocabulary because sometimes I have to know the etymology, I find it in online dictionary.

Extract 9 (S15): I think also it depends if you like to learn grammar, for example grammar conjugations and everything so practice is the key plus to memorize.

S14 except for just referring on how to use all the resources mentioned before, he/she refer to a specific grammatical phenomenon which she finds particularly difficult, that being the use of grammatical tenses in English.

Extract 10 (S13): I guess the difficult part is grammar, vocabulary is more easy because you can always google, but for me tenses are hard, for vocabulary I just google, or use dicos online, I translate German to English and is okay. But grammar is very hard, and all these structures. So I just practise more and more with grammar, I have a grammar book with exercises. I don't have time to use it haha but I have it home. Also my mum is a teacher so she checks on it, she doesn't really know law but it helps in structuring and grammar and vocabulary.

Regarding the next group of students, those who study engineering, the majority says writing reports is a difficult task to pursue, and most of them are attentive to grammar and vocabulary. It is interesting to see how two students' opinions are contradicted when it comes to grammar and vocabulary in writing. S9 refers to grammar as the most difficult, while S10 characterizes it as the easy part since it presupposes rules you have to follow. Their opinions are presented below:

Extract 11 (S9): I think it's more difficult about the grammar, the vocabulary you can always find the words and translate them. In grammar you cannot find it if you don't know it. The structure or organizing is easy because I think its universal, when I think in English I just think in English, writing is difficult just because of grammar. So I try to check the grammar all the time. I google things and I also have a grammar book. A good idea is to ask my friend to help me. It's difficult because I have to put more effort, I have to do 50 sentences and all getting together, grammar, vocabulary, everything.

Extract 12 (S10): I think I can handle grammar better because they are just rules you have to follow, but yea voc is the thing you develop with the passing of time and you can write same things in different ways, the only thing I can think about it is that I have to express the idea concisely and correctly, for example you have to write in 3 pages the whole story so it has to be specific. This is the challenge, to sum up all my ideas really concisely. I need to have a planning and then I write what I think I should write and go over and over again and then cut it on and cut it on and change the structure, I go over and over again. About vocabulary I don't really check dictionaries. I google a lot.

Overall, when it comes to this group the same strategies are employed when it comes to helping them write English in an academic manner. Answers such as checking dictionaries, using Google and Google translate to disambiguate structures or check the meaning of words, planning, summarizing and keeping notes are also proclaimed as important. What is more, asking someone who is supposedly more proficient to check a text or working in groups with the aim to give feedback to each other were strategies also reported by that group of students.

The last group which participated in the study, namely the students who belong to the department of linguistics is the group that appears as the most selective and aware of more specific problems, or else of problems which are more linguistically oriented rather than task-oriented. This means that they specifically refer to the structures that cause the greatest hurdle. It is also interesting to see that the problems in writing do not appear individually as problems in grammar or vocabulary, but they are seen as a combination appearing in lexis, syntax and structure. In order to make this point explicit, some examples of their sayings should be presented below. S16, S17 and S19 report:

Extract 13 (S16): The use of connectives is really difficult because now I'm more aware of the fact that maybe I used them in the wrong way, and then instinctively I say "Oh, I should go back and check it again, make sure it's that" through dictionaries or online. Also, the vocabulary in general is hard, because I'm starting to realize all the nuances and the shades. I cannot find the right word, and because of the classes I take I realize that I tend to use certain words in wrong situations when we are expected to be more accurate and precise. So, I'm not a good example of learner. I try to plan and structure and pay attention in Grammar. Ideally I take it step by step, I have a plan and use keywords and match the keyword with the concept and be sure that it happens in English, don't translate from your language, check the words and build from them, not from your language. That's important. Also, collocations are tricky. When I write too quickly I tend to transfer words or phrases from my mother tongue, I simply translate it, and most of the times it doesn't work that way, and I say I know this word in English but do I use it with the right next words? Not always haha.

Extract 14 (S17): And then the most difficult for me is to find the words that go, collocations and the connecting words, I see that, I don't know a word and I go to the dictionary and then the problem is that I don't know which word to use to that specific context, I know that people do certain mistakes because of that, they select the first one they see and they use that, so what I always do I check on a corpus or I check online

on google and try to see if the 2 words go together and then try to understand the context too. I think the dictionary is the first step, you check on the translations, and then on google or google books where the language accuracy is better and then still if I don't know what to write I go on the BNC and again I check. This is what I do.

Extract 15 (S19): By reading 2, 3 times what I wrote and thinking does this sound academic enough, should I use more scientific terms so that it sounds better. And then I check the grammar, I try to use all these structures in English which you have to know of course. They don't come out naturally like in Romanian. For me I think the biggest problem is the connectors, like first of all, however, we keep on talking about their importance, and I now realize how important they are because for us in the uni there was not specific class about academic writing so we didn't really think that much about how to structure a phrase or what connectors to use or what I write really means or word lists and see how they should be used. So this is the 1st problem I notice here when we started talking about them. I just read and re-read my arguments and my paragraphs to make sure they are cohesive and that what I write matches is a good combination of grammar, lexis, collocations.

From the extracts above, we can deduce that the problems the students of linguistics find in relation to writing an academic paper are of bigger linguistic interest since they refer to those aspects of the language which should be efficiently combined in order to produce a coherent and cohesive text. They seem to find it particularly difficult to find "which word matches which", namely the collocations in English. In relation to this, the nuances or the implied meanings of a word may play an important role when it comes to its choice as the relevant word to use or not in a possible written text. What is more, using the words that function as connectors also appear difficult for them. Thus, we observe a difficulty discerning the combined use of grammar and vocabulary. The strategies employed by this group of students can be summarized below: planning, structuring the ideas and in consequence the text produced, understanding context, using dictionaries, tools recommended by their professors or corpora to track unknown words and the right way to use this specific word with others, thus aiming to linguistic accuracy and a smooth combination of lexis, grammar, context. They also use keywords and match them with concepts, they refer to the best decision to abstain from translating from L1 even if it is particularly difficult, and lastly they practise writing more and more.

5.4. Doing academic presentations

Moving on with the second skill to be examined, i.e. speaking academically, naturalized in the setting of the international university, the majority of the students referred to their inhibition or fear to use formal language extensively in front of their colleagues and professors. They render this reaction in the feeling of being stuck or at a loss when it comes to speaking publicly, especially in a language other than their L1 and in a situation highly academic and formal. Another difficulty identified by them is their extra effort to make their ideas or points transmittable and accessible to their audience, thus expressing their arguments clearly, in contrast to the easiness to do so in the L1. S5 refers to this feeling as facing a wall. She explicitly says:

Extract 16 (S5): The easy part is doing the presentation the hard part is doing it in English because I cannot get my idea directly, it's like I hit a wall. It's not like when I speak French where if I know the idea then I can talk about it. I need more time and more practice.

Also, using correct grammar and being understandable in terms of accent and pronunciation is considered as highly important by the students. Presenting some of the answers they gave is important for our better understanding. For example, the attitude S9 employs when he/she has to do a presentation in English:

Extract 17 (S9): Yesterday I had to do a presentation in English so it's fresh, I am used to do presentations, I am not nervous I think, I only hesitate when I don't remember a word, in English is more difficult. I try to find an other word to describe what I want to say. I put the bullet points, I underlined the main points and did the presentation to myself without looking to what I wrote. So did it in my mind. When I was younger I would translate it in Portuguese and ask someone to say it in English, but now I try to describe it in English in other words. Of course if I prepare the presentation it kinda flows but yea I find it easier to do it in Portuguese.

And S15 reports:

Extract 18 (S15): It was nerveracking, it always is, when I don't know the word and try to find it I try to change the sentence and remember, to memorize and pretend I say it out loud home, I feel incredibly nervous so I won't be able to speak ahah. In secondary school I had difficulty expressing myself, I said the word in Portuguese, because I really couldn't remember it.

By comparing the two extracts, it is visible that the level of anxiety varies among the interlocutors and is undoubtedly a catalytic factor affecting their ability to be good presenters of a topic in a language other than their mother tongue as they feel more or less able to use the spoken form of the language effectively. It is important to spot the differences among the groups too.

Regarding the group of students studying political science and law, a particular pattern can be observed. It is evident that they mostly deal with the problems reported above by memorizing the part which they have to speak out or they give a reading of a text which they prepare beforehand for that purpose. In the cases where they feel stuck or cannot express themselves adequately, they tend to resort to paraphrasing their idea or use a synonym for that matter. Changing the structure of the sentence to deal with the meaning which needs to be expressed is sometimes of paramount need. Another student referred to his/her resorting to using his/her gestures actually to support his/her sayings.

Extract 19 (S13): Speaking is okay, I had one presentation and they were connected to my MA thesis so it was okay, I'm not anxious. I just read the bullet-points from the powerpoint and give comments on them. Maybe I change the structure of the sentence to better express the idea at that point but in general I usually learn them by heart. That way it feels easier.

Extract 20 (S3): I don't feel bad when I speak in English, is more a problem to know well the concept and try to say it in public. I have to communicate specific material. I get stressed in front of my professor and my classmates but I try to organize the ideas before and plan what I will say from home. Before the presentation I tell myself to relax and I go. Of course I use easy words, I write a document from home and I learn it. And I learn the definition too. I remember the first times I was so afraid I forgot everything. So I tried to find other words and I always use my gestures. I have no other way.

Last but not least, it is interesting to see how a student resorts to translating a different word or term in her mother language knowing that some of his/her colleagues in the audience come from the same country; thus, she resorts to saying something she doesn't remember or cannot express in her L1.

Extract 21 (S14): I'm not the biggest fan of doing presentations. I feel stuck some times with words and with phrases and plus is the stress but like since we are all exchange students we all make mistakes and that's okay. I had to do this presentation and I had some German friends in class so what I did was to say it in German and waited them to tell me

the word in English but if I have to do it in an other class where no-one speaks German I think I have to rephrase so that we understand each other haha. I usually read my notes but then I feel bad because I feel someone will judge me for reading from the points. So I ignore what is written and try to do it myself, and then voila, I can't express myself in English, it doesn't come naturally.

The next group to be presented, the master students who study engineering seem to be relaxed when it comes to presenting a scientific topic in front of their classmates, asserting that they mostly improvise in front of their classmates without needing to recite already prepared texts. However, their casualness comes in contradiction with their clear and definite description of English as a difficult language to give a presentation. As S6 says:

Extract 22 (S6): The easy part is to make the presentation in the PPT and the difficult part is what to say in English. The problem is that the people I speak with about this matter know more than me and I have to be specific and accurate. It's difficult not to make a mistake so the difficult part is to try not to make a mistake in technical things. And also, it's real time so all my mistakes in grammar come forward and I feel embarrassed when I cannot use the tenses or the endings in words correctly. So, it is speaking in front of people and memorizing the technical things because they are the way they are. And let's say I am stuck , I say eeeemmm and uuuh and I try to find the word, it happened the other day when I had an interview, I was stuck and I had the word in Spanish but I couldn't remember it in English and I found a way just to explain it with other words. Speaking it's the most challenging.

What is more, from their sayings we can deduce a tendency to memorize some technical terms since their field of studies is undoubtedly more practical than theoretical.

Extract 23 (S8): Sometimes I also do memorizing because some terms you cannot express them in an other way. The root of the word is always there, I deal with romance languages, the words are very very similar, of course there are differences for ex. centimeters are expressed differently in BR English so I have to adapt to their language, so then I memorize yes.

In the three groups described so far, there are some students who appear to be more confident and relaxed in giving presentations in English. A student (S2) who studies political science is not anxious and tries to add a natural result to her speech, and S10 who belongs to the group of engineers refers to practising

English as the most effective way to deal with both the language itself and the anxiety which escorts it. Another kind of exceptions, S7 and S11 who study engineering and law respectively are the students with the lowest proficiency -from the results of the previous assessment- in English referred to barely any strategies they use. Overall, the strategies used by the students so far when presenting can be summarized: paraphrasing an idea, restructuring a sentence, using synonyms to replace a term, summarizing important points in bullet-points, mumbling or improvising, creating a text from before and using L1, are strategies one resorts to when he/she feels stuck. In terms of language, pointing to grammatical correctness, using the right word and aiming to good pronunciation and accent are extensively used by the students who participated in our study.

The last group, the students of linguistics appear to be the most relaxed students when it comes to presenting a scientific paper or their research in front of the class; they also tend to improvise rather than using a fixed paper with notes, in contrast with the students who belong to the other departments. Of course the problems they assert they face are the same with the rest of their colleagues, i.e. problems in organizing the ideas and creating correct structures, and most often problems with anxiety and the fear of the stage. S18 refers to his/her problems and how she tends to deal with them:

Extract 24 (S18):Because of the anxiety or the stage fear I get stuck with the language too, so I become too self-conscious of the language, like something happening in my head, and make actually more mistakes then but I try to paraphrase and rephrase and take a deep breath. For the preparation part, I prepare about that from before, which step is after something and what I want to say, yea definitely there is a lot of preparation there. Although I think I don't stick to that because when I have something prepared it also feels like it's in the way and I feel I have to say what I already planned but that's not the case, I don't really have to, is just in my head. If it's a topic I'm comfortable with, I prefer to improvise.

It is also interesting to see how a student chooses to use simpler grammatical constructions and maybe even simpler vocabulary if she faces problems with the language. This idea comes in line with what S20 said about the right of everyone who is a student in this department to sound less native or possibly

not correct, as if he/she is not native by nature. In that way he/she chooses to legitimize the mistakes or the pauses a non-native speaker may make during a presentation; asserting however the importance to certainly be fluent. Both students also brought up the strategy of trying to relax and de-stress oneself before the presentation. It is noticed that this group of students mentioned that keywords and acronyms of certain words or ideas are helpful if someone needs some extra help. S17 talks about it, adding also that the most effective way to conduct academic speaking is to continue practising. Thus, it seems that the most effective way to be successful on the productive skills is indeed to practise the skill. Last but not least, by observing how some students in this group refer to a strategy which is not really helpful or effective, that being translating from and to the L1 in order to express an idea or remember a particular word, it can be deduced that this group of students is nonetheless self-conscious and self-aware about how to use the second language and they recognise the most effective ways to do so.

Extract 25 (S16): I have my slides and key words and then I try to improvise really. I should use more simple grammar and not very complicating tenses because even for me it's hard to talk in front of people.

Extract 26 (S20): I think there are 2 things, you have to allow yourself to take your time and to take a deep breath and not run, you can just go like aaaaahhh, and take some time to find the word, and you can also allow yourself not to be a native, they know you are not a native, I don't know how to say that in English but I mean this and this. Yes people put you in pressure to be a native, but nobody from the class is a native, you can be really fluent but you never gonna be a native, just you need to accept that and people put so much pressure on that, but please accept that you are not a native. Its okay to say, I cannot say that in English.

Extract 27 (S17): Usually I improvise having in mind the ideas I read or okay sometimes I write down some words which help me remember them. Of course when you speak you don't use exactly the same words you wrote so I always find 1 or 2 synonyms for the main ideas. And the more you practise the better so it's better like this and this.

5.5. Participating in group projects in the university

The third activity in which the students were asked to assess the linguistic problems they encounter and the ways they find to manage them was their participation in projects with their classmates in groups, usually during or towards the end of the semester in order to do a research project -as a

requirement for a course they attend. The vast majority of the students reported that the most prevalent problem they face is understanding their classmates' pronunciation, so the differentiation among the groups is scarce. S2 and S12 remarkably note:

Extract 28 (S2): Usually in group projects I am with my classmates, so things are very relaxed. We just speak casually and the most responsible from us make most of the work haha. Sometimes some peoples' pronunciation is not easy to understand but we can ask questions to each other, so it's okay.

Extract 29 (S12): It's easy to express myself and usually I work with international students with some experience from abroad so that definitely works. When you interact with people whose English is not their mother language either it's not a problem, I think if there are problems you can always solve them with dialogue. And I think here everyone is independent.

Notable is the fact that they actually feel quite relaxed and confident when they participate in group projects, in a way justifying this easiness as they speak and try to relate only with non-native speakers of English; thus, they can be more casual and not be judged in case they misunderstand something. According to their sayings, when speaking with non-native speakers of English and additionally when they are members of the same class and of the same group, then it is undoubtedly an easy task to undertake. When it comes to multiple accents and a more stressful environment, repetitions of one's argument in order to be understood and using one's own words are the ways to employ and help the situation. S6 refers to it.

Extract 30 (S6): Sometimes is difficult because you understand it, in your head is clear, but when you try to to explain in to the other person is more difficult, because you try however you can to explain. Most of the times, it's difficult at the beginning but then is fine. For example, I had 2 Chinese guys and 2 Portuguese in my group, so really many accents. So I repeat and repeat and repeat everything and say everything my words, because if I use the terminology they will not understand anyway.

Thus, all of them reported that keeping oneself relaxed and open to the discussion are effective ways to deal with each other in speaking, as a group project is an interactive process among the interlocutors. When it comes to the productive part; when a student has to produce speech herself, S18 who happens to be a student of linguistics claims that a non-standard accent does

not necessarily function as a problem for him as it is something expected to exist when we refer to non-native speakers of English, but being clear in ideas, and so using the “right” words and the grammatical structures are traits of paramount importance for the better understanding to be succeeded.

Extract 31(S18): I don’t get distracted with accents, I understand this feature. I just ask for clarification if I don’t understand. Again I work on the vocabulary I will talk about and I try to be grammatically correct, even if I don’t have to since it is just speaking with the rest of my classmates.

What is more, her colleague in linguistics says:

Extract 32(S19): Maybe I have some problems in communication, sometimes it’s true when I express some ideas I have one thing at my mind but then I’ use some words that don’t really express what I need to say. Just make some paraphrasing and hopefully people will understand. Just make a bit more effort to understand and make yourself understandable. Helping to monitor the communication is the most important.

For this student, of high importance is to be able and orient yourself as a speaker towards the better understanding and communication even if that entails some extra effort from the interlocutor’s part. Also, some students referred to the importance to speak slowly and in “elementary English” (S9), (S7) and by restructuring or rephrasing the ideas to opt for a better understanding. “Creating a secure place” (S4) among the interlocutors that no-one feels less proficient than the rest; thus adjusting to the interlocutor’s needs are the students thoughts about participating in group projects. Last but not least, some of them associated the productive skill of speaking with the receptive skill of listening and how the first can be developed through the better acquisition of the second. So, they propose that students can practise listening in order to develop their speaking acquisition. S4 and S16 make this suggestion.

5.6. Attending lectures or academic seminars

Regarding the next activity in which students referred to the problems they meet in English the vast majority of them, regardless their field of studies, asserted their general ease to be recipients of input in English when

they attend lectures or academic seminars in UCL, except for their difficulty to understand the professors' accents. In order to deal with this adversity the majority of the participants resort to asking the professors or more frequently their classmates to help them disambiguate.

Extract 33(S9): I think it's easy but some times it's not because some teachers have the French accent in their English, so it's more difficult to understand if they said one thing or another, you are not sure, it gets ambiguous. If one point is less clear if I trust my colleagues I ask them but usually I ask the teacher, I am older now, not so shy haha.

Extract 34(S13): I wouldn't say I have any problems. If I don't get something I ask the teacher.

Other students, for example S1 and S17 refer to different ways to deal with the difficulties they face during a lecture, those usually being to check online for the topics covered during the class which are always uploaded on the platform which is designed for the students to have access to articles or information about the course. Also, resorting to background knowledge and redirecting one's attention to regain focus were examples of strategies. Finally, the recording of lectures was mentioned by S14.

Extract 35(S17): I think it's the easiest part because I just take the information from the professor, there is always a ppt and so it's easy to follow. I try to pay attention and not to get lazy and then I try to interpret what the professor says. But I think this happens implicitly. Also it is easier to understand what is going on during the class if you have read the articles you will analyze into class from before or during the semester I think it is easier because you can remember what you did before. Again with the vocabulary, at first I used to go to dictionaries, now mostly I rely on context but of course the best way is the dictionaries.

Again, the fluctuation among the different groups in problems and strategies in this activity was of not serious variance.

5.7 Reading scientific articles and books

The last skill to be investigated, reading, embedded in the setting of reading articles and books in the academic setting was reported as an activity relatively difficult for the majority of the students, since most of them claimed facing problems in understanding the scientific vocabulary in relation to the scientific ideas each text looks into. The strategies employed by them were mostly that they practise reading more in order to understand, they check dictionaries or google translate to understand unknown words

and sometimes they resort to the context in order to make up for these words' meaning. Also, making a list of the difficult vocabulary or asking the professor to disambiguate any misunderstandings or difficulties was reported by S6.

Extract 36(S6): There is always something you don't understand, maybe a word or something, you have to look it on the internet or you can try to understand it into the context. Depending on how tired I am, or if it's something really important that I have to know I also check it in the dictionary and then I try to put down those words in a paper and read them because I think always reading is good to improve your vocabulary in English and grammatical structures and know how to express yourself. But usually I'm super busy and lazy to read them after. If I don't understand an idea then I mark everything and ask my professor.

An other student who studies engineering reported checking the grammatical structures is also of paramount importance for development. It is interesting to see how the students who belong to a practical field of studies and reported more casualness when it comes to the English usage, actually report using really effective strategies to deal with any problems that occur in understanding and using English. Referring to some of them, S9 reports taking notes, summarizing, using keywords in post-it notes.

Extract 37 (S8): They all have very complex vocabulary which is overwhelming and I have to be slow and check dictionary, google translator, also a paper dictionary, and also I just rely on the context. So I try to understand and I read and reread and reread. I underline first the important ideas and then I take notes. All the contact with the language help you dominate it, especially when you don't like the topic, for ex. transportation policy, omg it's so boring but of course it helps me become better. I also check what tenses the person who writes the book use and if he use difficult grammar.

The students of linguistics tend to use more linguistically oriented strategies, rather than skill-oriented ones, probably because of their high awareness of how English works or should work. For example, S16 refers to the usage of online search engines to consult any information that needs disambiguation, i.e. mostly unknown words or tools suggested as helpful resources for that matter. What is more, noting keywords in a text may also function supplementally. S18 refers to firstly reading the certain text fast in order to get the ideas from it and then he/she tries to create meaning of unknown words through cognates. She regards one's knowledge of cognates as an effective way to make meaning out of something linguistically difficult. What is more, guessing from context

is one of the most frequent strategies the majority of the students resort to, and S18 even said that relying on context rather than trying to understand every difficult word in a text equals more than 50% of the effort one does to understand a scientific text.

Extract 38(S16): Most of the time I find words that I don't know so is mostly google, and if I can find enough info I don't go further but sometimes I need to use more specific tools. I use the tool they showed us in the EAP class or Oxford dictionary. I think the first thing is to learn to find keywords, and if it's a keyword you have to check it but I don't think that students should check every single word because it may take forever. It's enough to understand the article unless of course if you have to speak about it or answer certain questions where you should give it a second reading and more focus.

Extract 39(S18): Usually I don't have problems, I start with scanning the text and then I skim for information. Of course guessing from the context is the 60 % of what I read, but I also try to check the unknown words and understand the word families. Knowing the cognates sometimes works a lot more than having a list of words as you start with one word and then you suddenly know 10 of them which are of the same family. And that's how you can build a good command in English.

Concluding this section, it can be deduced that the majority of the students tend to use the same types of strategies to manage reading scientific books or articles whose main difficulty is to understand the unknown words in order to reach the overall meaning of the text. Summarizing those strategies we can see for example, understanding from context, using Google to investigate words and ideas, using online or paper dictionaries, read for skimming and for skanning, activating general and background knowledge and for those who are interested in linguistics, employing keywords, cognates and lists of word families are useful ways to monitor understanding in English and acquire linguistic knowledge in the independent setting of the international university.

5.8. Concluding remark

Many of the informants perceive themselves as proficient enough in English. But when they are asked to describe their difficulties in English they cannot explicitly state the nature of their problems. They conclude by saying "it's ok", "it's fine", in order to justify their response and possibly to deal with these difficulties. For those students, tolerating the difficulties when these come up is enough. They do not really want to recognize the difficulty, as they can "deal

with” it. What is more important to them is their ability to be international students, a situation which grants them some extra prestige, without paying too much attention to the linguistic difficulties. The fact that they manage with their studies is unquestionable, however the question of the consequences this stance towards English has in their learning, in their understanding and communication arises. For them, there should be a certain cost in their academic achievement and linguistic acquisition, however, the benefits of being an international student are considered as more important for them.

Chapter 6 DISCUSSION- 2ND PART

6.1. General trends and patterns of strategy use of all participants

The data collected from the interviews reflect the students' problems and strategies when it comes to the four linguistic skills and sub-skills. From the activities they were asked to evaluate according to their experience in the academic university, the ones that they referred to as more challenging were the productive skills, i.e. writing and speaking academically. The receptive skills were assessed as more manageable, since they mostly provide students with input. It is interesting to see that the majority of the students, regardless their field of study seem to face the same kinds of problems in all the skills.

When it comes to writing academically in a second language, students have to develop their linguistic and discourse skills through instruction and continuous practice since these cannot be transferred from the first language if there has been a lack. However, academic writing in a second language cannot be simply perceived as a group of skills acquired from the learners or just some steps which need to be followed in order to create a well-structured and cohesive text. It is an undoubtedly complex activity which calls for effort, motivation, low levels of anxiety which requires organizational and strategical planning, and also knowledge of vocabulary, grammar and certain discourse norms. Nunan (1999) asserts the importance of knowing the discourse conventions in writing as they “will show learners how to use their knowledge of grammar in the construction of coherent texts” (p. 290). According to Berman (2007), proficiency plays also an important role in writing academically as students with lower levels of proficiency may resort to reassuring that grammar and vocabulary are correct, usually at the cost of organization and content. Thus, writing is an active, non-linear task to pursue, as the “act of juggling a number of simultaneous constraints” (Flowers and Hayes, 1980, p. 31).

In our research, the majority of the students expressed their problems in dealing with grammar and vocabulary in writing in general. They gave a detailed description of the problems in vocabulary as they usually refer to unknown words or phrases they should look up in the dictionary; however in grammar only a few of them reported their

problems in great detail. This can come to grips with Van Patten's (2002b) view that by default learners give priority to meaning rather than form.

Their comments basically reflected their scepticism towards grammatical structures in general. It is interesting to see also that the students of linguistics emphasized their difficulty to know all the collocations in English, thus referring to the difficulty to know exactly which word matches with which in each context. Writing is a means to develop their grammar, vocabulary and organizational skills since they attempt to use as correct forms (in relation to the standard norms of English) in both grammar and vocabulary as possible. Accuracy in grammar, spelling, punctuation and extended knowledge of vocabulary are of paramount importance and necessity for them. As a result, in order to achieve those, they tend to use a number of linguistic strategies. O'Malley and Chamot (1990) were pioneers in conducting research on second language writing strategies, and their followers Olivares-Cuhat (2002) investigated the effect of specific strategies on second language writing achievement. Also, Aziz (1995) reflected the effect of the strategies on the learners' proficiency. Both of these studies emphasized the importance of cognitive strategies when it comes to the skill of writing. Our area of inquiry is to discover which strategies are used by the students in different fields of studies and the possible connections these may have with their self-perceived proficiency in English in particular and their relation to their attitudes towards English in general.

6.2. Writing

Starting from the process of actually composing the text, from the data it is revealed that the first group of students (those who study political sciences) who participated in our study use both cognitive and metacognitive strategies to deal with the composition process. The generation and the organization of the ideas occur usually at the first stage of the writing process, along with planning and grouping or putting order to the information they need to use during writing. During writing they employ problem-solving behavior since they tend to use vocabulary and grammar in an attentive way and read again what they wrote in order to see if it is semantically and syntactically correct. In relation to this, the cognitive strategy of substitution emerges when the students tend to substitute either ideas or language related problems (for example, finding a synonym of a lexical item) during the writing process. Assessing what one

has written is sometimes neglected, however research has shown that more successful writers spend time reviewing and rereading their texts (He, 2005) either focusing on the content or the language of their composition. These students also referred to certain compensation strategies, i.e. finding synonyms and paraphrasing, and affective strategies, i.e. creating a relaxing and comfortable environment to write. Also, social strategies are important to them too since discussing with a professor or arranging groups with their classmates to write together help them deal with the writing procedure. Students who belong to the department of engineering reported being mostly attentive to grammar and vocabulary when writing academically. Last but not least, the students in the department of languages referred mostly to the steps they follow in order to actually compose a written text and in their difficulty to fully understand how to use one word with another in the right way, thus the collocations.

6.3. Grammar

Linked to the writing strategies and of equal importance are the grammar-focused strategies existing in the students' repertoires which were explicitly referred to by students who study engineering and law, asserting that they are particularly attentive to grammar and in correct structures in English. Rubin (1981) refers to them as conscious cognitive strategies and groups them in four categories: "Deductive Reasoning", "Monitoring", "Clarification/Verification" and "Practice". In these categories we can place the strategies suggested by the students, for example, searching for particular grammatical rules online, asking or discussing with someone the correct form, consulting a grammar book and practising how to use the correct forms of grammar in the productive skills. The last two strategies were recommended by the students in the field of linguistics, as some of them said they use certain tools or corpora to deal with the linguistic structures. For Rubin (1981) they are "specific actions which contribute directly to the learning process" (p. 118). It has to be stated for the students who study linguistics that they constitute the group which employ strategies which aim to resolve issues in both accuracy and fluency simultaneously, thus giving emphasis on both the meaning and the form at the same time through the observation of the grammatical structures and collocational patterns through corpora. McEnery et al. (!997), particularly asserts: "This can lead to students challenging reference works on the basis of their own observations; it is no exaggeration to say that exposure to corpus data turns the student into a researcher (McEnery et al., 1997). This way of exploring the rules

and the grammatical idiosyncrasies of the standard English language could be placed as an option towards adoption by the students of the other fields of studies and could undoubtedly function as an effective way to cope with certain difficulties.

6.4. Vocabulary

Some strategies the students referred to when they face problems in vocabulary are contextualized as they are found in specific tasks or skills the students undertake, for example inferring meaning from a reading which helps students see how words appear under certain grammatical use and how they are placed in a phrase, making thus visible their collocational and connotational environment. Other examples of strategies, such as the grouping of words according to an associated meaning or using the keyword technique, acronyms and rhyming are mnemonic techniques used mostly by the students of linguistics. However, according to previous research those strategies are supposedly used mostly by learners with lower levels of proficiency (Van Hell and Candia Mahn, 1997).

Other strategies, such as the use of dictionary to understand the meaning of a word, guessing the meaning from the context and learning synonyms are compensation strategies aiming to help the better acquisition of vocabulary. Evidence from previous research has shown that for the better vocabulary acquisition both contextualized and non-contextualized strategies should be employed by the students. Fraser (1999) found out that learning vocabulary from context should be enhanced with some randomly chosen techniques, like consulting a dictionary or checking the meaning online as a technique to be combined with inferring the meaning of a word from a text. The strategies used to overcome problems in the sub-skills of grammar and vocabulary can be employed in any of the four linguistic skills.

6.5. Speaking

The strategies the students use in the productive skill of speaking were accessed through two meaningful contexts where speaking occurs, the first being doing presentations and so, speaking academically in front of the professor and the classmates and the second referring to speaking in a group of classmates with the aim to complete a project work. The first situation reflects more formal use of language, while the second situation appears as more casual. Regarding the first situation, when students meet difficulties in

conveying their meaning across while doing academic presentations they find alternative ways to communicate it by using mostly compensation strategies, such as talking around the missing word or idea, paraphrasing it, pausing, using gestures, finding synonyms to unknown words. What is more, they use memory strategies, such as memorizing their speech and creating keywords or making meaningful to them associations between words and ideas. Also, metacognitive strategies such as adjusting and monitoring their message and affective strategies such as regulation of their feelings and soothing anxiety help them deal with speaking publicly. It is interesting to see even the slight differences among the groups and make a connection between the groups of engineers and linguists; both groups recognize themselves as the most relaxed ones, resorting to improvising instead of memorizing a text and helping themselves to relax and de-stress and even use simpler linguistic structures in case they are unable to use very formal language at that moment. It seems that their difference lies in the reasons behind those decisions. Engineers use those strategies as these are the only tools available to them to deal with any problem in speaking, while linguists, as more experienced users of the language refer to their condition as non-native speakers as a normal condition where a non-native speaker has the right to make mistakes and not be perfectly proficient, as the audience he/she addresses is composed by non-native speakers too. Their more relaxed attitude towards English in general and their acceptance of differences are undoubtedly reflected through the ways they manage academic speaking.

Regarding the second situation investigated, speaking in front of peers is an easier condition according to the students' statements. The majority of them -except for some students in linguistics- find the difficulty in understanding their classmates' accents as a problem they address by using compensatory or social strategies. However, in general they feel confident, as themselves and their co-interlocutors are non-native speakers of English, thus they do not have to be attentive in the way they use English. As long as they get the meaning of their ideas across to them, then their purpose is served.

6.6. Listening

In the next skill investigated through the research conducted, that being listening through the contextualized situation of attending an academic lecture, mostly compensation strategies were reported by the majority of the students. It is crucial to see, however, how students in the field of linguistics make use of more metacognitive strategies, developing thus an awareness of what they have to do in order to accomplish a listening task; usually by activating their background knowledge and redirecting their attention to the task. Cognitive strategies are employed when they guess the meaning of unfamiliar words and more social strategies arise from the students who ask the professor or their colleagues for disambiguation.

6.7. Reading

Last but not least, the skill which concerns reading academic books and articles, a unique relationship yields; the one between the reader and the text. According to the top-down model which is interactive in its nature and illustrates the reading process as reader-driven rather than text-driven, the reader is placed exactly in the center of the procedure where his background knowledge, his experiences and perspectives are brought in the forefront and with all these supplies he is able to construct comprehensive meaning from a text. The participants of our study, in their entirety, used mostly cognitive and metacognitive strategies, the first category used by the learners to deal with a comprehension problem, while the second category functions when the reader controls himself in relation to the reading process. From previous studies it is shown that most successful readers used mostly cognitive, metacognitive and compensatory strategies, while less successful readers tend to rely mostly on grammatical structures and word meaning (bottom-up model). From that, a question can be raised regarding the different groups in our study. For example, the students who study engineering emphasized the fact that they resort to dictionaries and search engines to look for difficult grammatical structures and vocabulary in case they do not understand a certain point into a text. Could we thus deduce that their proficiency is lower in relation to their colleagues in the field of linguistics who employ more global and metacognitive reading strategies?

6.8. Patterns of variation in strategy use by proficiency level

Overall, it can be deduced that the majority of the participants in our study mostly use compensation strategies and to a lesser extent affective strategies. Students in the field of linguistics tend to mostly use cognitive and metacognitive strategies. As stated at the beginning of the section, our center of interest is not restricted only in which strategies they report that they use, but also to possibly demonstrate how the language learning strategies are related to the students' level of proficiency. Previous researchers have investigated language learning strategies from various perspectives. It is shown that there is a positive association between the language proficiency and the types of the strategies used. Although the participants in their entirety reported using all six types of strategies in a more or less same frequency, the differences in the manner that these strategies were used from the different groups can be depicted. Again, the differences among them are not of considerable difference, however they are noteworthy. Assuming by default that the students of linguistics are more experienced users of English and probably more proficient than the rest of the groups, and taking into account previous studies in LLS according to which more proficient users of a language tend to be more effective in the strategies they use; thus if we accept this assumption, it seems from the results of our investigation that they mostly use strategies (cognitive and metacognitive) which pertain to more proficient users of a language. From the results it is implied that cognitive strategies which enable students conceive and produce the language and the metacognitive ones which help students to monitor their own cognition are two types of strategies particularly important for more proficient learners (Bruen, 2001; Green & Oxford, 1995, Wharton 2000). However, Bremner (1999) reported "no clear indication of causality in one particular direction" between level of proficiency and usage of strategies (p. 504).

By the same token, these students are more self-aware and self-conscious of the language on the whole, the problems they may face and how they should use it effectively and accordingly more confident than the rest of the students. Last but not least, there appears to be a certain correlation among the self-perceived proficiency of the students, their usage of strategies and their overall attitude towards English. It seems that the students who turn to more compensatory strategies and are more attentive towards grammar and vocabulary are the ones who refer to themselves as proficient enough to use English, but they tend to compare themselves with native speakers of

English, either by expressing their respect and admiration to their “superiority” or by expressing their willingness to develop their proficiency and reach a higher level of proficiency. On the other hand, the students who are more open to other varieties of English and are more tolerant to differences in pronunciation or mistakes in syntax and lexis, are the ones who employ more self-driven strategies aiming to better monitoring their language. Of course the point of reference and the legitimate variety for them is also the standard variety of English, but assuming that they are more experienced and more aware of the efforts and difficulties to reach an advanced level of proficiency, they allow differences to be expressed and other modes of representations of English to exist.

6.9. Pedagogical implications

Based on the findings of this study, some pedagogical implications are suggested. Strategy research has indicated that learning strategies are teachable (Chamot & Kupper, 1989; O’Malley & Chamot, 1990; Oxford, 1990) and it is believed that the ones which are used by more successful learners can be learnt by not so successful ones. Also, it has shown that more advanced users of English tend to use more strategies and more effectively; thereby equipping all students with more strategies by making them aware of the available strategies to them, would help them during their learning process and if adjusted to their personal learning style they would help them face any problems with a second language more effectively. Helping students to better comprehend and produce English as independent users of this language and assisting them to better supply their cognition with ways to deal with it, may promote a more dynamic usage of language learning strategies and development of their proficiency.

Chapter 7 STUDENT NOTES- DISCUSSION

In this section of the dissertation the students' notes will be presented and discussed in order to discover whether their self-perceived proficiency is reflected in their own writing. Of course, this method entails a number of limitations as it only reveals how students use English in the written form and cannot depict their ideas on the whole, and what is more, only 8 students delivered the notes to me, which is not a representative number at all, probably because they were asked to do so some time after we conducted the interviews. This may mean that some of them did not want to be further engaged with this research and spend more time on that. However, the positive aspect is that I was given the opportunity to form an extra opinion on their level of proficiency and double check their sayings by examining their writings too; therefore for triangulation purposes.

The students were asked to describe the topics of their theses in an academic manner. Five students from the department of political sciences, two from those who study engineering and one who studies law sent me the document. On the whole, when someone reads the summaries can understand a high level of proficiency with some deficiencies in grammar and vocabulary. It is visible that the two students (S6, S7) who study engineering use simpler grammatical structures and vocabulary, however with a lot of technical terms. The one student who studies law (S15) is the only person who lives in the UK from an early age, and so his/her proficiency is particularly high. This can be deduced as the text is coherent and cohesive, with smooth flow and "right" usage of words. This aspect is exactly the one which is not depicted in the writing of S3 and S7, thus an overall difficulty to compose an academic texts can be perceived. This realization comes to grips with the statements of some students who study linguistics about the importance of the collocational patterns. At last, S1, S2, S4, S5 produced rather academic texts with some mistakes in grammar and in the collocational patterns, reflecting the problems they themselves asserted during the interviews.

Overall, a corresponding relevance between the students' statements and their actual written texts can be observed, reflecting in a way their self-perceived proficiency and the difficulties they meet in their writing. The students who reported lower

proficiency in English and certain difficulties in writing indeed appear as less skilled writers, while the ones who asserted that they can manage writing in English seem to produce more proper -according to the academic English standards- texts. As a direct result their levels of confidence towards the “correct” usage fluctuate depending on exactly this idea about themselves. Hopefully their high self-awareness on their linguistic skills help them develop their proficiency.

Chapter 8 A SHIFTING APPROACH TO ENGLISH IN THE UNIVERSITY

Yet reality indicates that it is English which has become the main language of instruction in the European international university. Internationalization has played a significant role towards this direction with the physical mobility of students and the transfer of international knowledge, along with the need for a homogeneous educational setting to be created. The process of Englishisation has undoubtedly affected the international student and the English usage in the university symbolizes more than the established notion of English as a *Lingua Franca*. English-medium teaching and learning in the university is often identified as an ELF setting (Jenkins, 2011), however, the real practices of English shaped there do not seem to comply with this idea. The real practises indicate the acceptance of a variety of English which is not as loose as ELF but it is mainly used by non-native speakers of English. Hence, the variety which occurs reflects a hybridity in its identity, as it cannot be characterized neither as ELF nor as Native Standard English. The formality of the contexts it entails, namely writing and speaking in an academic manner, and so the usage of the forms in their canonical types but from a group of people who do not belong to the Inner Circle linguistic paradigm, leads us to the conclusion that they do not correspond to neither of the two established models referred above.

Despite being generally confident and satisfied with their skills in English, the students who participated in the study, admitted they find difficulties in comprehending academic texts or in producing an academic written text themselves. All of them reported using strategies to deal with their daily academic lives and the majority also asserted their continuous effort to develop their proficiency in English. So, it is assumed that most of them see English as a challenge, and they do not recognize themselves as owners of the language.

The empirical question raised in order to shed light to the sociolinguistic matter this dissertation addresses is the question of the linguistic norm in English in the international university for its improved function. The idea is that the norms according to which the language proficiency can be measured or related are not evident. Linguistic variation comes to the forefront as different points of view are taken into account.

Which linguistic expression is perceived as more legitimate than an other in the specific context of the international university is a very basic sociolinguistic statement and the question of the proficiency is not automatically answered. The question is what kind of proficiency do the students have and which expectations does this fulfill? Does it relate with the normative variety of English? The aim is not to oppose English as a Lingua Franca and the Standard variety of English, but to suggest a shifting approach towards English in the university. English as an Academic Lingua Franca could be that model which is interested in the linguistic issues of the students who are international academics. A huge amount of academic discourse in the university occurs in English from people who are mostly non-native English users and according to Mauranen (2008) “it is accuracy and effectiveness in reporting findings and constructing, not the native-likeness of a text, accent, or turn of phrase” that is important. (p. 258).

The biggest corpus of academic ELF, the Corpus of English as a Lingua Franca in Academic Settings has in its collection more than one million words of authentic academic English from non-native speakers of English, aiming to publicize the linguistic features of those who are entitled in the international university. With the development of corpora with written and spoken academic English and the open response from the academic community to the recurrent change of the norm and its reconstruction, the different ways the academics use English may become more acceptable and hopefully legitimized. So far, good academic English has been associated with native English, however as it is stated above and as it is widely known reality lays beyond the perceptions. Thus, it is necessary that change is positively accepted and the linguistic features of the academics to be collected, recorded and established as an alternative but legitimate way to use the language, of course in agreement with the international university. English is undoubtedly a Lingua Franca, however not in the context of the international university. A relatively significant distance is observed between the communicative agency of ELF which can be observed in relaxing scenarios where interlocutors’ linguistic mistakes are perceived as normal and their aim is to get their meaning across, in contrast with the standard native English where meaning and form should appear in great harmony leading to an impeccable result. The truth for academy lays somewhere in between -favoring the ENL variety- and it would be good to better observe the linguistic product the students produce and upgrade its linguistic value; in a way to create a bridge between the expectations of the

university as an institution and what is pragmatically feasible. Of course, thinking about the right conditions for this to be achieved, the agreement among the relevant parties (students, professors, policies) and considering its establishment will definitely take a long time. Our effort is to bring to line which proficiency and linguistic skills are asked from the students, what is accepted as correct and legitimate and what actually happens in the international university.

Chapter 9 CONCLUSION

The final chapter of my dissertation aims at providing a summary of the concepts previously presented and discussed and indicating the limitations of this study. What is more, some recommendations for future research shall take place.

9.1. Overview of the findings

As the main aim of the study was to explore the self-perceived proficiency in English of international students and the problems and strategies they meet in their academic lives, the concepts referring to proficiency, the different varieties of English, and the presentation of the linguistic realities in higher education were presented since they were of paramount importance for the depiction of our inquiry. Also, with the reference to the linguistic problems and strategies we framed our theoretical background. The scope of investigation was too broad, combining the domains of L2 proficiency, English-medium instruction in higher education and second language problems and strategies. It was crucial to refer to the various concepts, since the presentation of one led to the better understanding of the next, and so on and so forth.

Hence, from our data analysis it emerges that the majority of the students perceive themselves as highly proficient in English, skilled enough to cope with the expectations of the international university, however not devoid of problems and challenges when it comes to English. For them, the native model of proficiency is highly respected and continuously referred to as the “correct” or “good” realization of English. Thus, they place themselves a step back, referring to the need to always develop in English in order to reach the desired level of proficiency. As previously stated, the groups of students who belong to law and political sciences fields do not perceive a gap between their use of English and the standard variety; while engineers pay attention to its functionality for the completion of their goals, without being concerned about the varieties as such. Of course, they refer to the standard one as the ideal, but far from their capacity and vision.

The group of the students who belong to the field of linguistics, since they are involved with linguistic topics, are the ones who question the legitimacy of standard English, considering that it is not per se the most appropriate tool to be used in the academic setting. They regard their use of English as elaborated and highly developed,

but still, even they assert a distance from the norm. In their view, this difference does not place them in an inferior position from a native speaker, but only as an infringement of their academic status. They seem to be the ones who feel the tension between the desire to “keep and foster one’s own culture and identity, on the one hand, and the ambition to excel and compete internationally, on the other”.

9.2. Limitations and recommendations for future research

At this point of the thesis, some limitations should be taken into account. First of all, the area of our investigation was beyond question broad enough, not limited in one scientific field but rather extensive, as we tried to question the issue of proficiency in English in higher education from various perspectives. Despite its extensive length though, we managed to adequately answer the research questions and draw some conclusions on the matter. What is more, regarding the strategies used by the students, some of them explicitly refer to strategies which are not L2 specific, rather they may refer to ways one can use in the L1 too. However, they are still meaningful and lead to the development of L2 too. In addition, when it comes to the student notes research method, only 8 out of the 20 students handed their descriptions to me, maybe because they were asked to do so some time after the completion of the interviews. Therefore, the conclusions drawn from them cannot be generalized, as the data collected was not enough.

In this respect, it is hoped that future research may address the same broad topic of investigation, focusing on the missing points and addressing it through a way that can lead to even improved conclusions. Next projects need to actually measure the students’ level of proficiency and not take as a default assumption that since they are students of master level are advanced in it. Also, it could measure other factors, such as motivation and anxiety in a more informed manner. At last, the problems and strategies can be also measured through both qualitative and quantitative designs in order to better clarify them and potentially depict the differences between what is chosen among various options in a questionnaire and what is stated by the students as their empirical practices.

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APPENDICES

Appendix I Consent form for students to participate in the study

Appendix II Interview guide

Appendix III Transcribed interviews with students

Appendix IV Student notes

The appendices can be found on the memory stick given with the printed version of the thesis.

