Turning Asynchronous, Individual Learning into a Constructive Online Community of Practice: A Case Study of the 'L5' Psychology ESP Moodle University Course

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1. INTRODUCTION

Today's job market is characterised by a great degree of mobilisation, de-localisation and flexibility in many specialised sectors. Moreover, more and more workers feel the need to satisfy its demands by completing higher education courses, making the students attending university courses increasingly heterogeneous in age, competence and professional requirements. Their approach to their studies therefore changes based on the extent and nature of their previous education and professional experience, as well as on their intent to maintain their position of employment, improve it or find a new one in the same or a different field. Such needs may be provided for by blended or online university courses which allow aspiring students to benefit from higher education and its conveyed skills while managing their professional and personal responsibilities (White 2003; Osipov et al. 2015). Among these skills, foreign language proficiency both in general and for specialised written and spoken communication has emerged, leading to necessary considerations on how to adjust ESP teaching to new online affordances and instruments and intro-

duce students into their "chosen discourse community" (Cheng 2010). Therefore, universities must – and in some cases have already started to – tailor the teaching media, programs, content and objectives of their ESP courses to a new kind of virtual target class and encourage a social constructivist approach to learning (Robinson 1980, 13; Dalsgaard and Godsk 2007; Rogerson-Revell 2007; Stickler and Hampel 2010). Due to their full-time professional commitments and distant physical location in fact, these 'new' learners cannot attend face-to-face lessons but still need to be guided in mastering both conceptual and practical content during their study time. This lack of physical presence often leads students to feel disconnected from their teachers and peers and unable to follow the rhythm of the course. Furthermore, because these students already work, they seek practical skills and terminology that may be immediately applied in their current or desired work environment, as opposed to theoretical notions like in a traditional syllabus. Distance learning has therefore been considered a valid way to promote and provide flexible and collaborative courses for this new category of learners. A significant example of this type of course is represented by the bachelor's degree course in *Scienze e Tecniche Psicologiche* ('Psychological Sciences and Techniques') – hereinafter 'L5 course' – offered by the University of Padua's School of Psychology, which will also be the setting of the present study.

One of the main challenges – which however could be converted into a source of potential in online ESP teaching and must be factored into the course's planning and execution – consists in the type of ESP in question. Psychology ESP is a hybrid and evolving form, traditionally considered part of the 'English for Social Sciences' (Hutchinson and Waters 1987) branch and remains so in many fields of psychology (e.g. social, school, work and political psychology). At the same time however, certain fields of psychology are evolving similarly to highly scientific areas (e.g. psychobiology, neuropsychology, memory psychology, psychiatry). The multiplicity of fields, participants, forms and roles of interaction that psychology involves, as well as its continuously updated material and knowledge sharing, has led to a great variety of genres, registers and lexical-grammatical choices within the discipline and its discourse community. From a communicative perspective, psychology encompasses many environments and tasks (schools, rehabilitation and correction centers, organisations) and different skills (listening, understanding, suggesting, guiding, counselling) that must be included in ESP teaching. Moreover, scholars in Psychology ESP have become increasingly aware of the importance of academic English and its developing genres since they are also found in the work

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environment (team presentations, case presentations, reports, conferences, meetings) and are essential for knowledge sharing, negotiation and the acquisition of "academic literacy in the discourse community" (Cheng 2010, 80). This range entails different lines of reasoning and writing: in fact, while scientific communities accept new knowledge through a clearly formulated hypothesis that aims to fill a perceived gap in knowledge by relating supporting scientific evidence and data, sectors that are closely connected to the humanities rely on descriptions of case studies and detailed narrations and examples in order to back up the writer's argument (Hyland in Belcher et al. 2011, 12). The significance of Psychology ESP lead to necessary considerations and selections regarding lesson and course activity topics, as well as the threads of the course's asynchronous forum discussions. It also reflected students' personal and professional interests, thus considering both external and internal motivation, which is "one of the main factors influencing the pace and success of the foreign language learning process" (Kudryavtseva 2014, 1215). This, in turn, triggers 'deep approaches' to learning, which foster the students' interest and sense of ownership of the subject matter (Mauffette et al. 2004).

The present study will focus on the L5's *Lingua Inglese* course as an empirical case study and a starting point in considering necessary changes in the planning, teaching and evaluation of online ESP courses, as well as its potential and limitations. The 'Psychology in English' course activity, consisting in task-based collaborative wiki texts regarding specific branches or issues in psychology written by groups of students throughout the course, will be analyzed and proposed as a promising site of encounter that combines collaborative learning (Donnelly 2004) and problem-based learning (Mauffette et al. 2004; Lekalakala-Mokgele 2010) strategies with focused work-related aspects of Psychology ESP. Furthermore, by analyzing the course and the course activity, the study will question many common preconceptions on the limitations of online participation and scaffolding distance learning in higher education.

2. Distance learning

Distance learning is a branch of 'distance education' that emerged in the 1970's and has evolved in accordance with the development and employment of increasingly fast and elaborate media. Its initial intent was to provide lesson content and material that was as close to face-to-face teaching as

possible (Williams et al. 1999). Following experiments to "investigate the possibility of collaborative learning and teaching using new technology" (Richardson 2000, 3) in the 1980's, distance learning was also perceived as an innovative way to convey knowledge. One of the first definitions refers to it as a form of education characterised by:

- the quasi-permanent separation of teacher and learner throughout the whole learning process;
- the influence of an educational organisation both in the planning and preparation of learning materials and in the provision of student support services;
- the use of technical media – print, audio, video or computer – to carry the content of the course and connect teacher and learner;
- a two-way communication flow so that the student may benefit from the dialogue or even initiate it; and
- the quasi-permanent absence of the learning group for the whole duration of the learning process so that people are usually taught as individuals rather than in groups, with the possibility of meeting, either face-to-face or by electronic means, for both didactic and socialization purposes (Keegan 1996, 50).

This form of "mediated teaching and learning" (Williams et al. 1999, 2) has often been undermined by the preconception that online university courses are "easier" or "less qualifying" and that working students are less dedicated or persistent in their studies compared to full time ones. A possible explanation for this could be the confusion between 'distance learning' and 'open learning': while the latter provides free online lessons and material to all, the former is linked to a medium or long-term commitment that is available only to those who officially enroll in a course. Moreover, this form of teaching has often been considered limited in content and lacking in student participation and interaction. On the contrary, the following has been verified:

- quality of learning is 'as good or better' than face-to-face learning;
- students are highly motivated (appreciate opportunity/convenience);
- instructors are better prepared and organised;
- instructional resources are enhanced;
- collaborative teaching is encouraged;
- "it has *not* resulted in the replacing of teachers" (Williams et al. 1999, 10; emphasis in the original).

Another important aspect of distance learning outlined by Moore (1972, 1973) is the close and essentially positive connection between separation and student autonomy. Schuemer (1993) goes a step further,

claiming that student autonomy is both a prerequisite and a goal or ideal for distance learning as well as students' acquisition of the course's content, which is also encouraged by the development of online platforms which have also become a "comprehensive retrieval system" of material that is "highly directed, focused, and, quite often, limited in scope" (Hill and Hannafin 2001, 39). Because of this physical and/or temporal detachment from the classroom, students are compelled to develop and hone their sense of responsibility and learning management while teachers are responsible for providing clear material and lessons on time and being available to answer any questions and extra requirements based on the individual student's needs and situation. The curriculum of such a course should therefore contain both a general part for the exam and a flexible, 'customised' section based on the class to make the student feel like a relevant subject in a virtual classroom.

3. The L5 bachelor's degree

3.1. *Setting*

A promising solution uniting the fulfilment of the job market's demands with the unique nature of distance learning may be represented by the bachelor's degree course in *Scienze e Tecniche Psicologiche* ('Psychological Sciences and Techniques'), previously named 'Discipline of Psychological and Social Research', and now known as the 'L5 course', offered by the School of Psychology of the University of Padua. This three-year course is specifically aimed at working students and its importance is enahanced by the fact that there are only two official schools of psychology in Italy (Padua and Rome). In 2009, the University of Padua moved from the Uninettuno methodology to the Department of Developmental Psychology and Socialisation's (*Dipartimento di Psicologia di Sviluppo e della Socializzazione*) Psynet Moodle platform. The L5 degree has the same requirements – and therefore the same validity – as the School of Psychology's other bachelor courses upon graduation, contrary to common assumptions that "it may be difficult for the institution to attain parity of status and to demonstrate the parity of academic standards with other, campus-based institutions of higher education" (Richardson 2000, 6).

3.2. *Participants*

The content of all courses is online but still follows the School of Psychology's curricula, thus requiring a multimodal 'translation' of traditional course contents into new formats of communication and new media tools. Students carry out offline university activity during exams, internships and the preparation of their thesis. The choice to use Moodle necessarily entails a change in the view, planning and delivery of course content in order to promote social constructivism and connected knowledge, with a consequent change in the roles and perception of learning by students and teachers alike (Dougiamas and Taylor 2003; Donnelly 2004; Brandl 2005; Cheng 2010; Gorenc Zoran 2010; Stickler and Hampel 2010). As a result, the L5 *Lingua Inglese* course has implemented both a course-based approach and a student-based approach, especially in light of their noticeable variety in initial linguistic competence, subfield of psychology and professional figures and skills. Such a hybrid position reflects and encompasses respectively the extrinsic and intrinsic deep-level active approaches to distance learning described by Richardson (2000, 31).

Like in other distant education courses, L5 students are characterised by certain distinguishing features:

• Age: on average, higher (Robinson 1980, 9) than that of students enrolled in traditional bachelor's degree courses, although it has been gradually decreasing.
• Social, education and professional background (Kember 1989; Richardson 2000): different in connection with the varied age and consequent diverse level of education and/or work experience including travelling experience, learning and study opportunities abroad and communication/interaction with foreigners.
• Physical, geographical and temporal separation (Keegan 1996; Richardson 2000): L5 students often live in other regions and even foreign countries, leading to socio-geographical diversity.
• Identities: students presented themselves as students, professionals, graduates seeking to enhance their academic and professional competences or through other individual roles (e.g. parents, athletes).
• Pre-course levels: the restricted number of places and the mandatory entry exam (like the other bachelor's degrees offered by the university's School of Psychology), as well as the obligation to cover any deficiencies in training credits (OFA credits) throughout students' first year, debunk the misconception that students who attend distance learning courses are not at the same level as those who follow traditional aca-

demic studies (Richardson 2000) because the standards are different. On the contrary, L5 students often already have a degree, and sometimes even a PhD, from another field and/or university, making them even more qualified than many 'traditional' students.

- Goals and approaches to learning and applying acquired skills and material: many L5 students already work and often have been working for many years. Therefore they need to acquire and hone practical skills connected to their specific field of work that take different professional backgrounds and approaches into account, in accordance with a "just-in-time/just-enough training mentality" (Williams et al. 1999, 6). They also tend to apply the skills they acquire in classes in a more immediate and concrete manner.
- Aims: full-time working students either desire to maintain their current job position or progress in their field or another one. Some students have held their position for many years, so they wish to advance in the final years of their career while others enroll for the simple joy of learning (Taylor et al. 1983).
- Interest: these students focus on different fields of psychology and different professional figures (clinicians, researchers, consultants, volunteers, educators, specialised employees in companies), which translates into different communication requirements and expectations.
- Attendance and participation: flexible and often irregular, based on their work and personal schedules and deadlines.
- Relationship with teacher and colleagues: the creation of an online profile with an avatar or a picture allows the teacher and peers to directly connect the student's name and face. Moreover, L5 students tend to remain in contact with their colleagues (online or through face-to-face meetings) much more compared to attending students.

3.3. *Development in the online course*

Because of the bachelor degree's multimodality and virtual target class, many necessary changes were made to the course's structure in order to create a "holistic educational experience" (Raţă 2013, 190).

The course content was translated based on the new media (Robinson 1980; Donnelly 2004; Dalsgaard and Godsk 2007; Rogerson-Revell 2007) and increased affordances offered by the Moodle platform (Brandl 2005; Tardy in Belcher et al. 2011, 151). Therefore, along with the textbook, extra material was selected and proposed based on the topic of the week and the

students' voiced interests, including videos from a variety of sources such as online open university courses, TED.com and Youtube, short articles in PDF format or from websites based on popular psychology magazines and databases with articles on psychology. The video-lessons lasted up to 30-40 minutes so they could be easily viewed, while extra videos lasted up to 15-20 minutes to make it easier for students to watch and focus on them.

The lessons were prepared, registered and posted for a general audience who would watch it asynchronously. As a result, it was impossible for the teacher to see the students' immediate reaction or any non-verbal signs (e.g. nodding, skepticism, perplexity, enthusiasm) and the only way to gather feedback consisted in the official evaluation method and the questionnaires written by the teacher. Because of the students' relevant gap in linguistic competence, the language used in the video-lessons (featuring the teacher delivering the lesson and a built-in side screen with the lesson's PowerPoint presentation) fluctuated between a B1 and B2 level, with explanations and examples of main concepts and the rephrasing and repetition of key concepts (*Tab. 1*).

There was more focus on practical and immediately 'spendable' goals and skills (Widdowson 1998, 10, 13) in accordance with the students' needs. In fact, as Hyland (in Belcher et al. 2011) pointed out, it is not necessarily true that all students must go through all of the phases of a traditional language course in order to use a language productively, for learners "acquire features of the language as they need them, rather than in the order that teachers present them" (Hyland in Belcher et al. 2011, 9).

Deep-level and holistic (based on inferring, meaning and active understanding) rather than surface-level or atomistic (memorising, reproduction) learning processing (Richardson 2000, 20) was implemented. In fact, "students adopting a holistic approach to their normal studies related new material to their own knowledge and experience, stressing the importance of reorganising new information in terms of existing knowledge structures" (Svensson 1977, 240). It is also best suited for older and experienced students, who tend to perform better when actively intervening on the material rather than passively memorising content (Richardson 2000, 179-180). The readings and videos were therefore problem-based or topic-based and followed by discussions asking students about the contents, opinions, previous experiences, comparisons or analyses. The students' grammar was not corrected in the discussion forum in order to encourage students to write freely, although the teacher's answers purposefully presented the correct wording and/or vocabulary.

Table 1. – Outline of the 2014/2015 L5 Lingua Inglese course.

WEEKLY TOPIC	LESSON CONTENT	LANGUAGE SKILLS
1. Branches of psychology	Words pertaining to psychology in General English and Psychology ESP	Prefixes/suffixes, understanding and translating noun phrases
2. Psychology in practice and mental disorders in popular culture	Vocabulary on clinical and occupational psychology and mental disorders	Word stresses, types of essays, beginning research
3. Psychology and computers	Computer jargon and research on the internet, abbreviations and acronyms	Developing ideas in a text, discourse and stance markers
4. Dreams and personality	Vocabulary on Freudian and Jungian theories	Word/vocabulary sets, understanding new words, describing trends and processes
5. Vygotsky and Piaget	Vocabulary on Vygostky and Piaget's theories	Compiling a bibliography, quoting, introductory verbs and expressions, paraphrasing
6. Memory	Vocabulary on memory and different types of memory	Fixed written and lecture language, providing 'given' and 'new' information
7. Personality	Vocabulary on personality theories	Opening and closing digressions, lecture language and giving references during presentations
8. Modern addictions	Vocabulary on modern addictions and their effects	Neutral and marked words and expressions, understanding and using long academic sentences
9. Parapsychology	Vocabulary on parapsychology and alternative therapy	Connecting words and phrases, speaking to a patient about mental conditions

For all students, and in particular those who did not participate in the course activity and the forum discussions and those who needed to practice more for the final exam, traditional exercises based on the video lessons were provided on the platform; the answers to the exercises were provided the following week.

New forms of participation, materials and social interaction (Rogerson-Revell 2007) and feedback with teachers and peers through various means (forums, the mid-course workshop, the course activity) were implemented. Constant interaction with students throughout the course had the twofold advantage of allowing the teacher to verify the students' online presence and participation and of enabling students to practice their writing and argumentation skills while gradually learning from the material. They also built a positive and collaborative "collective scaffolding" (Cheng 2010, 76) relationship with colleagues and the teacher thanks to their feedback and comments.

The order and content of the lessons were based on two criteria: the topic of the week (indicated as the 'lesson content' in *Tab. 1*) involving one or two branches of psychology, and specific language skills. The latter represented steps that followed the students' course activity work (i.e. recognising and choosing among different types of essays, conducting research, developing, connecting and presenting ideas, quoting, using fixed academic language) and aimed at helping students complete tasks and write the course activity assignment. The way the skills were presented and taught changed according to their importance for everyday use (reading, television, formal and informal conversation, social media). Accordingly, lifelong learning, which focused on strategies that will be employed and developed after the course, was proposed as the course's ideal objective.

3.4. *Data collection and analysis*

As emerged from their initial self-evaluation, most students felt they were between an intermediate and upper-intermediate level (B1-B2 of the CEFR) when it came to 'General English' but unprepared in relation to specific terminology in Psychology, with the exception of those who were already working in the field. The *Lingua Inglese* course involved the vocabulary and description of both sociological branches (occupational psychology, development psychology, social psychology and popular culture) and medical-scientific subfields (memory psychology, addictions and relative neuropsychological consequences) to stimulate students' interest

and introduce them to an array of disciplines that could relate to their current or future field of interest. It was also seen as an opportunity for students to interact by sharing their professional experience and learning about their colleagues' different connections with various subjects and institutions (e.g. interacting with a patient or with a colleague, giving oral presentations, preparing reports and informative material).

Academic English was included to introduce and prepare students to read, understand and elaborate scientific material and write a scientific text resembling their future thesis with colleagues in a professional context. This fostered both writing skills and what Rui Cheng termed "two-way collective scaffolding" (2010, 74) as well as more traditional forms of scaffolding among students and with the teacher. Moreover, recently re-evaluated oral communication contexts, such as signpost language and Q&A sessions during lessons and conferences or dealing with a patient, were included in the lessons and reinforced through extra material such as online video-lessons from other universities and conference videos.

The material, as is typical of ESP courses, was updated and authentic (Robinson 1980; Hutchinson and Waters 1987) but had to be limited in quantity or quality because of the students' limited amount of time (usually at night or at weekends). It not only had to be pertinent and relevant but also fairly short, graphically easy to read on a computer screen and to understand from a linguistic point of view. The articles were therefore extracted from popularising psychology magazines and journals and from recent studies that were aimed at a general public and not only the scientific community. Other sources were represented by online versions of the journals, blogs and online communities, forums, social media pages and apps that could be read on a daily basis. In this way it was also possible to expose L5 students to current linguistic trends in online professional communication and discourse (Robinson 1980, 20; Barton and Lee 2013).

A crucial and much appreciated part of the course was the variety of forums that were accessible on the course platform:

- Discussion forum: three or four discussion threads with an online article or website or a video on the week's topic were presented each week, with a question or series of questions on a specific issue. The teacher would answer the comments individually to further the discussion, add extra points of reflection or material and indirectly correct common mistakes by rewriting the sentence correctly and explaining appropriate terms and expressions.
- Grammar and language forum: for questions and threads regarding some of the most difficult and common grammatical issues for students

(using and distinguishing between verb tenses, modal verbs, enhancing vocabulary, etc.) written by the teacher using approachable language and examples.

- Extra material forum: a space where extra material found by the teacher and students could be posted and made available for all. It was not strictly connected to the course content but promoted as extra research and reading, leading to an increased presence of resource-based learning that support varied learning needs (Hill and Hannafin 2001; Dalsgaard and Godsk 2007).
- Course activity forums: both for the activity in general and one for each group to allow students to ask questions and to provide a space for group members to freely discuss and develop their assignment and organise their work.

Such an approach was very productive for such a diversified class, especially because the course took place in the first semester of what was – for almost every student – the first year of their studies. It allowed them to become familiar with the platform's functions and to know and interact with their colleagues. Furthermore, it included all five of the conceptions of learning found and defined by Eklund-Myrskog (in Richardson 2000, 40):

- learning in terms of remembering and keeping something in mind;
- learning in terms of understanding;
- learning in terms of applying knowledge, based on understanding;
- learning in terms of getting a new perspective;
- learning in terms of forming a conception of one's own.

While the first type of learning – present when it came to learning vocabulary – was passive and prevailed in students with a lower level of linguistic competence and/or lower confidence in their communication skills, the other four required students' active intervention on and elaboration of the material content based on their knowledge and experience. This was also fostered by teaching students how to understand and remember new words and expressions.

3.5. *The 'Psychology in English' course activity: analysis and findings*

In the light of an ongoing interest in collaborative learning and working (Gotti 2014), the most important part of the L5 *Lingua Inglese* course consisted in the elective 'course activity', which focused on online communication and academic writing in English as the exclusive working language and aimed at preparing students to collaboratively work on a specialised text using

psychology ESP and practice related communication skills (Kankaanranta and Louhiala-Salminen 2013, 27, 31). More specifically, it consisted in a group assignment, in the form of a scientific text written by a group (400-600 words per member), that involved almost all of the interactive actions of the learning process that are typical of participative lectures, i.e. talking, writing, 'watching for', thinking, and doing (Williams et al. 1999, 125).

In order to encourage students with less experience to participate, extra credit was awarded to group members: 10/100 (students must attain at least 60/100 to pass the test) and 15/100 in case(s) of excellent assignments were accredited upon participation in the discussion and group forums and the completion of all tasks.

Before creating the groups that would work on the single group assignments, the students had to complete a self-evaluation questionnaire to reflect on and evaluate their initial linguistic competences[1] (with reference to the levels and official assessment grids of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages – CEFR). They were also asked to answer a few open questions[2] on themselves and their goals (Belcher and Lukkarila in Belcher et al. 2011, 3, 73-77). This facilitated the organisation of materials and activities according to students' real needs and interests, fostering a learning-centered approach and making students feel like an important part of the process (*Tabs. 2* and *3*).

Table 2. – Initial self-evaluation: (40 answers total).
Source: author's elaboration.

	A1	A2	B1	B2	C1
Listening comprehension	5	7	16	11	1
Reading comprehension	2	4	17	15	2
Spoken interaction	3	5	20	12	0
Spoken production	2	6	25	7	0
Written production	2	7	21	8	2

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[1] The criteria were the following: listening comprehension, reading comprehension, spoken interaction, spoken production, written production.
[2] The questions were the following: (1) What are your strengths in general and in your profession? (2) What are your weaknesses in general and in your profession? (3) What are your strengths in communication? (4) What are your weaknesses in communication? (5) What would you like to improve by doing this activity?

Table 3. – Goals expressed by students
(40 answers total, more than one answer per student).
Source: author's elaboration.

STUDENTS' GOALS	NUMBER OF ANSWERS
Improving English (in general)	12
Psychology ESP	8
Teamwork and collaboration	7
Spoken English and fluency	5
Communication	5
Written English	5
Learning more about oneself and gaining confidence (in general)	4
Vocabulary	3
Listening comprehension	3
Reading comprehension	2
Overall improvement	2
Learning academic English	1

At this point, 38 students (excluding later dropouts) had adhered to the project, so the teacher formed 9 groups of 4 or 5 students (except in one case where there were three members), based on the students' feedback. The created groups included students with various level of linguistic competence in order to recreate a realistic teamwork situation among non-native speakers who must understand and communicate while negotiating and helping one another in order to reach a common goal. Each group was given a topic to write about, based on one of the lesson topics, by the teacher. This compelled students to either work outside of their comfort zone or, in certain cases, allowed an 'expert' student on a certain matter to share his or her experience and knowledge with his or her peers.

After the groups were formed, the most important phase of the course activity, divided into *tasks*, took place. This phase lasted from 2-3 weeks into the course (first year students could only access the platform a week after second and third grade students) to 2-3 weeks after the end of the lessons. The tasks (executed in each group's activity forum exclusively in English) followed a specific order:

Task 1 (1 week): decision of group roles to be discussed among group members, based on self-introduction and presentation of competence, desire to try something new and/or conviction of one's strengths and weaknesses:

- Manager: point of reference both within the group and with the teacher; he or she had to supervise the presence and work of each member, solve any problems that might arise and submit the group's assignments by the appointed deadlines.
- Grammarian: responsible for checking and correcting the grammar and sentence style of his or her part as well as that of all other group members to the most of his or her level and ability.
- Researcher: this person had to do research on the topic based on the approach and type of the essay that the group chose while ensuring that the material was credible and up-to-date and managing the bibliography section.
- Coherence checker: his or her role was to make sure that the entire text made extensive, appropriate and consistent use of the content of the course content (discourse markers, structure, phraseology, etc.) and that it was all well-structured and readable.
- Fact and reference checker: responsible for verifying the validity and accuracy of all facts, material, data and references to the text.

In groups composed by four members, one of the roles could be shared among all members or taken on by one of the members. In the former case, surprisingly the role that students wanted to share the most was that of the 'manager' so all members could have a say. Other solutions included the coherence checker also being the fact and reference checker or each member doing his or her own research. The least sought after role, except in the case of particularly confident or precise students, was that of the grammarian.

Task 2 (1 week): discussion and agreement on the type of essay (descriptive, analytical, argumentative, comparative/evaluative, research report); division of the assignment's structure and work load among members (400-600 words for each member).

Task 3 (5-6 weeks): collaboration and discussion among group members while writing the assignment; the teacher regularly intervened to confirm students' presence and to help out by answering questions, making suggestions and encouraging students; submission of final group assignment as a wiki created by the students in the Moodle platform.

Task 4 (2 weeks): exchanged peer evaluation of another anonymous group's final assignment (each member commented according to his or

her role) and teacher's corrections, feedback and evaluation of all final assignments based on the group's use of Psychology ESP, quality and use of reference material, application of course content, consistent structure throughout the entire text, as well as the members' conduct and collaboration during the group work; final self-evaluation by indicating one's CEFR levels after the course and answering different questions[3]; students' evaluation of the course in the platform and the anonymous official course evaluation.

4. Discussion and conclusions

The L5 *Lingua Inglese* course here presented as a case study sought in general, and its course activity in particular, to establish interaction and negotiation and sharing within the course activity group and the community (represented by the virtual class) and with the teacher. This diversity encouraged students to deal with different registers, styles and boundaries of negotiation. Interaction and collaboration were also prompted by the circular feedback that students and the teacher exchanged. In particular, it was essential for the teacher to be present and active throughout the course with different forms of feedback: answers to posts, intervention in the group forums, feedback in the mid-course workshop on definitions and corrections and feedback on the final team assignment. This is important in promoting students' linguistic and personal awareness and development (Belenky et al. 1986) because it allows them to incorporate corrections and teachings into future work (see also Williams et al. 1999, 78-79). It is just as important, if not even more so, in the case of distance learning, since these students have no way of receiving it in person. The importance of feedback was mentioned at the final self-evaluation stage and was greatly appreciated and perceived as constructive criticism both there and in the official course evaluation (*Tab. 4*).

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[3] These questions were more focused on the students' approach to the course and course activity: (1) Do you feel you have improved compared to when you started the course? (2) If yes, where do you feel you have improved? (3) If no, why do you think this was the case? (4) What were your favourite and least favourite parts/activities of the course? (5) Did you enjoy and/or learn from the course activity (if you participated in it)? (6) Did you find the homework exercises and/or workshop useful? (7) Did you find my and/or your colleague's feedback useful? (8) Do you have any comments and/or suggestions for the future?

*Table 4. – Comparison of CEFR levels in initial and final self-evaluation
(before/after; 11 answers total). Source: author's elaboration.*

	A1	A2	B1	B1+/B2	B2	B2/C1	C1
Listening comprehension	2/0	0/1	5/2	1/0	3/6	0/1	0/1
Reading comprehension	2/0	0/1	4/3	0/0	3/5	1/1	1/1
Spoken interaction	2/2	1/2	6/3	0/0	2/4	0/0	0/0
Spoken production	2/2	1/2	5/3	1/0	2/3	0/1	0/0
Written production	2/0	1/0	3/3	0/0	4/6	1/0	0/2

Another relevant result consisted in students' markedly increased tendency to share videos, essays, ideas, suggestions and websites compared to previous years. The forums were considered very useful and positive because they gave students an opportunity to interact and practice their English in a gradually yet constant manner while learning more about the topic of the week and other related issues; the course activity was seen as productive because students did their own research and presentation of data. Knowledge was therefore constructed within the group, which fostered active learning within the group and further discussion on new topics or ideas that emerged. The correctness and confidence of many students improved during the course, as observed in the forum posts of attending students and their increase in fluidity and use of specific vocabulary throughout the weeks and decrease in mistakes that had been pointed out during the course by the teacher. Significantly, all the attending students managed to pass the official *Lingua Inglese* exam on their first try, demonstrating that they had mastered the content of the course while gaining further knowledge on their professional field and ESP during their exchanges in the forum discussions and course activity.

The main limitation of the course consisted in the impossibility to include direct spoken interaction or production, which could explain the irregular 'after' values for these two skills. This is due to both technical aspects (the number of participating students would have been too great to sustain a group chat or conference call) and organisation (the asynchronicity of the course and the students' different schedules and logon times would have made it extremely difficult to agree on a common time and date for real time interaction), as pointed out by students in the questionnaire. Such needs could be addressed by organising group chats or online conferences, although this would probably have to occur outside of the Moodle

platform and therefore in an administrative 'gray area'. Another compli-
cating factor mentioned by some students was the great amount of work
entailed by the course activity because of organisational difficulties in the
group, such as coordination with other courses' assignments, current and
unforeseen personal and professional commitments and dropout students.

In conclusion, the intent and structure of the 2014/2015 *Lingua Inglese*
course could be a starting point for further improvement in the planning
of Psychology ESP and ESP in general in relation to distance learning,
seen here as a resource rather than an impediment (Rogerson-Revell 2007)
to lifelong language learning as had been feared in the past. By addressing
and refining some technical and organisational details, such online courses
could further satisfy distance learning students' need for scaffolded but
flexible learning that is aimed towards the skills and problem solving based
construction of specialised learning and use of psychology ESP that is
required by the current job market.

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