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Caroline Mary de Bohun Clark,
Katherine Ackerley

Università degli Studi di Padova

Meeting the Challenges of Delivering Specialised English Language Training for University Staff

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caroline.clark@unipd.it

katherine.ackerley@unipd.it

1. INTRODUCTION

The drive towards internationalisation in European universities has led to an increase in the number of English-taught programmes (Helm 2017, 14; Clark 2018) and consequently in higher numbers of international students. This is bringing new challenges to university language centres and their teaching staff, with some universities offering their English-medium instruction lecturers both language and methodology courses (Cots 2013; Costa 2015; Helm and Guarda 2015; Dalziel *et al.* 2016; Ackerley, Guarda, and Helm 2017). In a pan-European study of universities offering English-taught programmes (henceforth ETPs), Lam and Maiworm (2014) noted that “the English proficiency of administrative staff, especially those in central administration (such as the registry, financial office, housing office, student service centre, etc.)”, especially in the South of Europe, was regarded as least satisfactory by the survey respondents. Lasagabaster (2015, 270) confirmed these findings following a study at a Spanish university, stating that many members of administrative personnel “were not only unprepared but also reluctant to deal with students in English”. Lam and Maiworm (2014) also found that “mandatory measures to improve the English proficiency of administrative staff are rarely taken”, with just a fifth of ETPs in

the Netherlands, Romania and Italy requesting their administrative staff to undergo language training.

In the Italian context, many of the incoming international students and academics have poor or non-existent knowledge of Italian and expect to be able to use English as a lingua franca to communicate. As Helm and Dalziel (2017) note, international students complain about a lack of support available in English at university beyond the EMI classroom. The increase in the number of international students not only calls for enhanced English language skills in lecturers, but also more inclusive linguistic landscaping (*ibid.*), more comprehensive information in other languages on university websites and, as shall be addressed in this paper, the ability of administrative and technical staff at universities to welcome and deal with students, staff and visitors from a wide range of linguistic backgrounds. The linguistic and intercultural competences of non-academic members of university staff are often overlooked, and support and training are not always sufficiently available. Yet language support and training are particularly important in Italy where, according to the 2012 *Special Eurobarometer* study (European Commission 2012), 62% of the adult population claim that they are unable to communicate in a foreign language. While 34% of Italians claim that they could have a conversation in English, this does not indicate that they are able to use the language efficiently in the workplace and communicate successfully with people from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds.

Despite the pressing need for research into language training for university technical and administrative staff, little has been carried out so far. Indeed, Haines and Dijk (2016) note that in their Dutch university context, previous studies concerning internationalisation and ETPs had focussed on academic staff and students and not on “the language needs of other stakeholders and support staff in the international higher education environment (such as course administrators, student support services, and front desk staff)”. Whilst many Italian university language centres are starting to respond to the needs of administrative staff by offering customised English courses, there is little evidence of this in the literature (an exception is Mesh and Rocchiccioli’s forthcoming study regarding courses for administrative and technical staff at the University of Siena). Because of this lack of research, little is known about the language training of administrative staff in universities, a gap this paper aims to fill.

This paper examines how, as a consequence of developments brought about by internationalisation and the need to extend language support ser-

vices to administrative and technical staff (known, in Italian and henceforth in this paper as PTA – *personale tecnico e amministrativo*), the role of university language teachers has changed over recent years. In particular, it focuses on how the Language Centre at the University of Padova is dealing with the training of such staff and addresses complex issues such as the high number of PTA with vastly diverse needs and language abilities. It also looks at participant feedback from these new courses and teacher reflections. It then considers changes that would need to be implemented to further enhance the language training on offer.

2. THE ROLE OF THE UNIVERSITY LANGUAGE CENTRE

The Language Centre of the University of Padova – the *Centro Linguistico di Ateneo* (CLA) – was inaugurated in 1997, becoming an independent structure within the University two years later with seven administrative staff, and 45 language teachers (known as CEL, or *Collaboratori ed Esperti Linguistici*) of twelve different languages. Previously, language teachers had been present in various departments of the University, where they taught the students of those departments. The number of language teachers peaked in 2005-2006 at 52, about half (24) of whom taught English. Their principle duties involved teaching and testing students – predominantly undergraduates – of the university. At this time, the focus was on the preparation of students to pass the language exams of their various degree courses, and very few hours were dedicated to any other type of course. In these years, before the shift towards internationalisation, the Language Centre had not contemplated running courses for technical and administrative staff. Although the University Staff Training Service had been organising English language courses for PTA for several years, it was only in 2015 that the Language Centre was asked to develop a project to offer courses on a large scale to University administrative staff.

The Language Centre has gained momentum over recent years and in 2015 moved to a new, purpose-built building which can boast a state-of-the-art environment for language teaching, as well as support services, a multi-media resource centre, testing facilities, etc. The Centre also reflects a shift in focus of language teaching at the University of Padova, where teachers are no longer exclusively concerned with undergraduate students but are increas-

ingly required to undertake very different teaching activities from those they originally trained for. These include, for example, teaching academic English to PhD students and courses for professors lecturing on ETPs.

Interestingly, over the same period, the number of teachers has diminished while the demand for more – and above all more variegated – specialised types of course has increased. By the 2017-2018 academic year, the number of English teachers had dropped by ten to a total of 12. This reduction clearly makes staff management more complex, in particular when taking into consideration the high demand for specialised courses such as those for technical and administrative staff. Teaching staff now find themselves having to adapt to a wider range of teaching contexts, in particular those which require inside knowledge and understanding of the University work environment, specialised teaching skills, as well as materials creation and testing.

3. COURSES FOR ADMINISTRATIVE AND TECHNICAL STAFF

The University of Padova employs over 2200 members of administrative and technical staff, which is a vast number of potential course participants. Until now, two large cohorts of staff members have been selected for participation in English courses (in 2015 and 2017) and the University Language Centre has offered a total of 57 English courses for up to 1170 members of administrative and technical staff¹.

A first level of selection of participants was carried out in 2015 by the *Servizio Formazione* of the Central Administration which asked Directors of Departments and other university structures to nominate up to 3 candidates to be considered for the courses. The courses were aimed at bringing staff members with a pre-intermediate level (A2) of English up to a complete B1 level, and at promoting oral skills in participants with a higher level of English.

However, those responsible for selecting participants were not offered clear guidelines or criteria for selecting potential participants. Extra places

¹ The total number of actual participants was 909 as not all members of staff took up the offer of a course. The discrepancy between the total number of placement test takers (756) and the number of people who followed a course is due to the fact that many of the participants who did not have B1 level of English enrolled on follow-up courses, and those enrolled on the specialised courses were encouraged to follow three modules.

were unavailable for those university structures where staff frequently deal with international students and visitors. As a result, technical and administrative staff members holding positions where the use of English is crucial were sometimes overlooked or, quite simply, the number of staff members using English and requiring training exceeded the number of candidates that directors were able to nominate.

3.1. The diverse needs of the administrative and technical staff

A questionnaire asking staff members in which aspects of their work they use English revealed extremely varied uses of English. While reading and writing emails is by far the most frequent task performed in English, the diversity of the types of communication is worthy of note. PTA staff stated that they write emails to international students and visiting professors, to suppliers concerning purchases, to conference guests, publishers, members of research projects, and so on. Other forms of written English include writing or translating contracts, writing technical or scientific reports, writing content for websites, news reports, and one participant even stated that he/she prepared materials for PhD students' lessons.

As for spoken English, respondents find themselves most frequently needing to speak to international students (either in their front office role or in planned interviews), followed by having to communicate with visiting professors and other visitors to the university. Two participants stated that they do presentations in English, while one participant who works in a university museum stated that English is necessary to deal with international visitors. Interestingly, only seven participants explicitly stated that they carry out telephone calls in English, which leads one to suppose that there is a preference for communicating with international correspondents by email.

3.2. The need for intercultural communicative competence

There are currently over 2,300 students from 110 countries enrolled at the University of Padova². Therefore, as well as language skills to communicate

² Data for the 2016-2017 academic year from <https://www.unipd.it/dati-statistici-iscritti>.

successfully in all these situations, the development of intercultural communicative competence (ICC) is also essential. Indeed, as one member of the University administrative staff expressed “Communication is effective when fluency in English is matched with competences which go beyond the language and imply awareness of cultural differences, as well as sensitivity and empathy with the interlocutor” (Pittarello 2017, 157). In this respect, she goes on to add, training is essential not only in her personal role as an international relations officer, but also for all those involved in English-medium instruction. It is fundamental, then, that the English teachers involved in teaching PTA courses are aware of the specialised language needs of staff members, but also of how to approach the issue of ICC in class.

3.3. PTA course levels (2015 cohort)

In 2015, the first year that English courses were offered to administrative personnel, 327 members of staff took a computerised placement test (which included listening, reading and writing skills) at the Language Centre to determine the organisation of courses in homogeneous levels.

Although the courses were designed for A2 level and higher, the results of the placement test showed 100 participants were either complete beginners or did not have a high enough level to enter a course. These staff members were advised to use the Language Centre’s online English resources before applying for the course again.

Of the remaining 227, very few (17) were placed in the B2 bracket and one was placed at C1 level. An interesting observation from the placement test was the wide divergence in skills, where it was not uncommon to find staff with, for example, very low competence in one skill (often writing) and very high in another. This discrepancy in language skills led to difficulties in forming homogeneous classes.

4. COURSES OFFERED (2015)

During the first year of PTA courses, three courses were offered at B1 level, divided according to the skills of participants. *Reading and Listening* and *Speaking and Writing* modules were offered to 99 and 85 members of staff

respectively. Participants enrolled for one or both of these modules depending on their performance in the placement test. The aim was for participants to reach a 'full' B1, that is B1 level in all four skills.

More advanced courses, aimed at developing speaking skills, were offered at B2 level, and one further course at B2-C1 level, with a focus on presentation skills. A post-B2 English for Specific Purposes course (*English for Administrative Experts in Research Projects*) was also offered. At this level the course was aimed at members of staff with specific interests, who routinely deal with contracts for EU projects and other forms of legal English.

The courses were organised in a blended format. In the case of the B1 level courses, participants were expected to attend eight two-hour face-to-face classroom lessons during work hours and to complete activities online. The MOODLE platform was used for classroom management and also for the online component of the courses. While many PTA already had good knowledge of MOODLE (since it is used throughout the university), some did not. Some reported that the use of MOODLE for teaching was very different from the format they were used to, and this also created some difficulties. The online part of the blended courses proved to be unpopular with the participants since they were required to study outside of their working hours. Both technical and time constraints prevented them from taking part in online activities.

Some of these issues also applied to 'homework'. CEL teaching the courses noted that PTA were not very enthusiastic about doing set work at home, either because it had to be done 'after-hours', or because they perhaps did not feel that it was necessary. Writing tasks were particularly unpopular.

At the end of each course, participants took the University Language Centre's English test (*Test di Abilità Linguistica*, or TAL), according to the level of course they had been following. This test had been designed for students as a compulsory component of their degree courses.

Because of the high number of participants, courses were run over three years, with many participants being placed on a waiting list.

5. COURSES OFFERED (2017)

At the end of 2016, the Language Centre was asked to run a new set of courses for a new cohort of administrative staff members, even though courses were still being run for the original large group. Following the first two years of

PTA courses at the University Language Centre, a number of changes were introduced in 2017.

Concerning assessment, it was decided to move away from the previously perceived need for participants to achieve Council of Europe CEFR levels with assessment based on the Language Centre's standardised tests and to test them instead exclusively on course content. This change was deemed necessary in order to remedy the perception that each CEFR level corresponds to a 'course'. That is, many had the idea that completing one course automatically meant achieving a CEFR level and progression to the next level which would be reached by following a 30-hour course. Because participants enrolled on the B1 level courses did not automatically pass the B1 level test, failure rates were high, as was dissatisfaction. A further reason for eliminating the use of the Language Centre's TAL was that, as mentioned above, the test was designed for University students and was therefore considered inappropriate for people learning English for professional purposes.

Because of the lack of engagement in the online or blended parts of the courses, it was decided that the new courses should be taught entirely face-to-face, in the classroom or language lab, for 30 hours. Online activities were made available and encouraged, but were considered optional.

Following the success of the English for Specific Purposes (ESP) course mentioned above, it was decided to offer a range of ten-hour modules (five two-hour lessons) to members of staff who had reached B1 level. Participants could choose up to three of these modules, thereby making up a total of 30 hours of lessons. The ten-hour modules offered were:

- *Speaking in the workplace*
- *Writing in the workplace*
- *English for Student Office / Front Office*
- *English for librarians*
- *English for international research projects*

By dividing the total course length of thirty hours into three shorter five-lesson modules, the aim was to offer a solution for participants which would allow them to manage better their work commitments with English lessons. The shorter modules also allowed participants to make choices based on their own work situations.

5.1. PTA course levels (2017 cohort)

At the beginning of 2017, a further 428 members of staff took the placement test and were consequently divided into class levels (see *Fig. 1*). As can be seen, reference to CEFR levels were avoided for this new cohort of course participants, as discussed above, and the more general taxonomy was used. As can be seen, demand for basic level courses remained high. However, because of the new offer of B2 level ESP modules, staff members with more advanced English skills were selected to take the placement test, therefore compared with the 2015 version where only 18 members of staff qualified to take the B2/C1 level modules, a higher number of people (138) were placed in the B2 course bracket. The 2017 B2 level courses were available not only to these 138 members of staff, but also to those from the 2015 cohort who had made progress with their English since beginning courses and were ready to enrol on the specialised modules. As a result, numerous editions of each course were necessary.

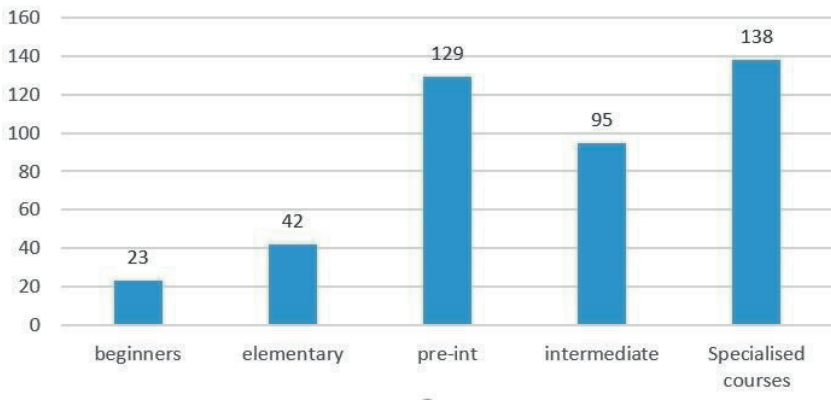


Figure 1. – Levels resulting from the 2017 placement test.

Due to the high demand, one of the most requested courses was the 30-hour *Intermediate* level course (eight editions for a total of 169 participants). As with the specialised modules, this course was available not only to the 95 members of staff who were considered to be at intermediate level following the 2017 placement test, but also to those people who had taken the 2015 placement test and had progressed from pre-intermediate level. The most

repeated specialised B2 level modules were *Speaking in the Workplace* (ten editions for 199 participants) and *Writing in the Workplace* (eight editions for 179 participants). Of the other specialised B2 level modules, *English for Front Office* was repeated five times, *English for International Projects* four times and *English for Librarians* once, to accommodate 93, 74 and 14 members of staff respectively.

6. FEEDBACK FROM PARTICIPANTS

The course participants in the five-lesson specialised modules were almost unanimous in expressing a wish for more hours of lessons, with some participants stating that they would appreciate a course which ran all year, instead of having to have a break between one course and another. Two respondents stated that they would have preferred shorter lessons: university language lessons tend to be 90 minutes long, whilst those for staff members are 120 minutes.

Other requests were for a greater focus on their specialised field of work, more conversation practice, more listening exercises, more materials for self-study and lessons outside of working hours. A pre-intermediate level student expressed dissatisfaction with topics that were too general, as s/he would have preferred to focus on situations that they actually encounter within their departments, such as dialogues with students or visiting professors, and emails concerning departmental issues. On the whole, however, feedback for the courses was positive with appreciation expressed explicitly for the English teachers.

7. FEEDBACK FROM THE ENGLISH TEACHERS

The English teachers were positive about their experience with the PTA classes. On the whole, they noted that the technical and administrative staff are motivated and “excited about being students again”. The atmosphere in class tends to be positive, with participants from different departments and of different levels of hierarchy collaborating and supporting each other.

It was interesting to note that teachers did not observe any awkward moments in classes which may have involved staff of different ranks in the

same office. At one point it was hypothesised that activities asking to share details with others (who may include management) of, for example, private life and free time may cause embarrassment. Similarly, it was hypothesised that some staff may fear being scrutinised by their office manager. One teacher, however, reported the opposite situation whereby a staff member who initially was concerned that her superior was in the same class, was very pleased to discover that her English was much better than his. Further, he would ask her help, and thus their normal workplace roles and interactions were overturned, and collaborative learning resulted.

Course teachers noted different classroom dynamics compared with student classes, and in fact found the PTA staff courses 'easier' to manage. University students seem to have inherent motivation as they are required to pass an exam and attain credits, while staff often do not. Similarly, given the asymmetry of the student/teacher relationship, student class behaviour tends to be restrained and they are not always forthcoming. The situation was very different for PTA, where teachers appreciated the "peer-to-peer" relationship with the course participants and noted that the classroom atmosphere was more relaxed than with student lessons.

Following the not entirely successful attempt to introduce an element of blended learning, the teachers became aware that they should not set too much homework. However, when homework was set, their students completed assignments on time. The teachers of the courses noted too a wide variation of competence within each level, often due to the discrepancy in placement test results mentioned above.

8. THE ROLE OF THE LANGUAGE TEACHER

English teachers at the language centre have undergone a rigorous selection process which places particular attention on their qualifications and further training. The teachers are also assigned a quota of hours for the preparation of lessons, over and above their teaching hours, which has allowed them to gain expertise in particular areas and to study and prepare materials.

The teachers selected for these PTA courses had a long experience in teaching courses for University students, which they continued to teach parallel to the University staff courses, as well as a commitment to gaining further knowledge in the field. They were invited to undertake the staff courses

because of their expertise and experience with student courses, but also because of their proven capacity to design materials, and their interest in, and awareness of teaching methodology and intercultural communicative competence. As the courses for Administration staff were new, and required a considerable input from teachers, this teacher expertise was considered essential.

Given that the administration staff often had a long experience in the work force and were also aware of what they needed from the course, teachers had to be prepared for a higher number of queries and questions than occur in the student class, questions that often require highly specialised knowledge. Such queries often demanded greater precision in their responses.

In the move towards internationalisation, providing English language courses for university administration staff is relatively new, and initially was not considered to be a first priority. Hence there is also very limited literature concerning this specialised area, and very little specific training available. From the courses held for non-academic staff at the University of Padova it has become evident that a programme of language skills must also have a strong focus on developing intercultural competences.

It has become clear that English teachers may require further training or support in lesson preparation and teaching methodology and practice. Given the particular needs of administrative staff to be able to communicate effectively within 'internationalisation', compulsory in-house training, or specialised externally organised courses should be made available to these teachers.

Further research into methodology and practice needs to be undertaken in order to prepare teaching personnel specifically for this type of course.

9. ISSUES ARISING

The feedback from teachers and participants, as well as observations from the course organisers have been valuable, and allow us to identify specific areas where materials and course content need to be refined. For example, regarding assessment, at first the approach to evaluating the participants' language skills proved unpopular. Initially, the focus was on achieving the CEFR levels using the University Language Centre standardised language tests (TAL – *Test di Abilità Linguistica*). Many of the participants were disadvantaged because of a wide range in their own level, depending on the skill. Lack of test practice

and, in a few cases, limited computer skills also played a role. Generally, success rates were low, and did not always reflect participant achievement.

What is more, it was found that attending courses and taking an end-of-course test (instead of a standardised CEFR-based test) removed the emphasis on the objective of reaching a minimum CEFR level and allowed a focus on measuring progress in terms of the attainment of useful language skills for the workplace. After the first two years, the use of standardised tests was generally considered inappropriate for this category of course participant.

As the initial edition of the courses were based on blended learning, a bank of online materials was prepared. These materials included some already available online for students and staff of the University, while others were developed specifically for staff. The language teachers therefore had to invest considerable time creating these materials, with the benefit that they were able to monitor first-hand how the activities were received. Nonetheless, the blended aspect of the courses, and the requirement to carry out weekly tasks in the online section was not entirely well-received by participants as mentioned above. The reasons for this were not a judgement of the materials themselves, but rather an expression of preference for the face-to-face part of the course, difficulties in managing time commitments, and in some cases participants' limited experience with computer technology for learning meant that they did not feel confident in carrying out exercises autonomously.

There is much debate about the level at which ESP courses are considered appropriate for English learners. What is noteworthy is that, while specialised modules are offered to members of staff with a B2 level of English or higher, an analysis of the questionnaire reveals that even participants of much lower levels require specialised English. For example, a participant in the pre-intermediate class stated that s/he dealt with finances in international research projects, which is a topic addressed in the *English for International Research Projects* module. This indicates a need for a certain degree of specialised English even at lower levels, possibly when a participant's general English skills are not yet well developed.

It was also noted that some of the PTA participating in the courses were not using English at all in the workplace – despite being selected for the course based on the need to use the language. In future editions, therefore, strategies will need to be developed to target more accurately the staff members who urgently need to improve their English language competence, especially in the light of the shift towards internationalisation.

10. FURTHER RESEARCH

A next stage of this investigation into English language training for university technical and administrative staff is research into the learning outcomes of the courses. It is also believed that the delivery of the courses can be enhanced by the production of learning materials that are more specifically aimed at this type of language learner. While several studies have been carried out on language used by students and lecturers (Crawford Camiciottoli 2004; Francomacaro 2011; Gotti 2015), research into language used by PTA is currently lacking. Such research would help identify linguistic and even intercultural issues, which could then feed into the development of more appropriate syllabi and language teaching and learning materials.

Another potential area for research is that of the different dynamics noted by teachers of PTA courses compared to student classes. Further research would be interesting to understand where these differences lie, and whether in fact they are related to the peer-to-peer relation between the teachers and participants, or other factors.

11. CONCLUSION

After two cycles of courses, it seems an opportune moment to reflect on some of the implications. The project itself is ambitious; it involves very large numbers of participants and is innovative in that University technical and administrative staff are rarely the focus of Language courses in Higher Education Institutions. In fact, language issues seem to be largely under-explored in the process of internationalisation – except in the event that they cause a problem. Although preparing University technical and administrative staff to be able to participate more effectively in the international sphere fits into the wider context of the process of internationalisation, there is little evidence of the necessary investment in terms of time and financing.

The reality and speed of the process of internationalisation of higher education has put pressure on the language centre to be able to supply teachers for these courses and there is an urgent need to recruit trained and experienced teachers. In the case of the advanced modules, the teacher's role is highly specialised, and requires specific training as well as more time being allocated to prepare lessons, thus entailing greater financial investment by the University.

On the other hand, teachers working with PTA courses require special skills in dealing with members of staff who have a wide range of job descriptions, therefore very diverse needs in terms of content. Similarly, varying needs in terms of intercultural competences should also be evaluated in order to provide the necessary training. As mentioned above, the dynamics of the PTA classroom are different from lessons with students, and teachers need to be aware of this diversity as well as a solid awareness of the context in which the technical and administrative staff work.

The need to develop a language policy that includes language support and training at all levels is evident. As Haines and Dijk (2016, 357) point out, it is necessary to emphasise language issues in order to be able to address the needs of all stakeholders across the university, including students, academic teaching staff, academic support staff, and non-academic staff. As well as the formal curriculum, there is also a further, informal, and a hidden curriculum, which has been defined by Leask as “the various unintended, implicit and hidden messages sent to students – messages we may not even be aware we are sending” (Leask 2015, 9). In the process of internationalisation, it becomes necessary to recognize and focus on the extremely complex learning and communication environment in which these implicit and hidden messages are sent and received by students, but also by technical and administrative, and academic staff.

Courses for PTA, and also academic staff, should not be considered simply as a language service for staff, but instead should be part of the wider picture of a comprehensive language policy. The development of a coherent language policy which includes all areas of internationalisation should underline the importance of adequately preparing administration staff to be able to communicate with visiting students and academic staff on the one hand, but also to prepare them to be able to carry out their administrative duties to a high level with international counterparts. Further, the provision of quality language courses for administration staff, allowing them to further their skills beyond the classroom, to encompass all aspects of the formal, informal and hidden curricula.

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ABSTRACT

The drive for internationalisation in European universities, and the resulting increase in English-taught programmes and international students, is bringing new challenges to university language centres. While many universities now offer linguistic and methodological training to the lecturers involved, it is essential that adequate training is also made available to non-academic staff. In 2015 the University of Padova Language Centre was asked to train administrative staff who deal with international visitors and students, many of whom lack effective communication skills in the local language. The language teachers involved find themselves in a new role, with challenges that differ from those associated with teaching students. This paper discusses how the specific language learning needs of university administrative staff are met by highly qualified and experienced university language teachers. It examines participant feedback and suggests training solutions that could enhance communication within an increasingly international academic community.