'THE CERTIFICATE OF COMPETENCE IN ENGLISH FOR THE SOCIAL SERVICES': USING OPEN BADGES TO SUPPLEMENT AND INTEGRATE TRADITIONAL UNIVERSITY CREDITS IN ESP

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Abstract

This article describes the use of an Open Badge certification for an English for Specific Purposes (ESP) course at the Turin University Language Centre. Open Badges are online records of achievement which document field-specific, soft and technical skills. They consist in a visual image and a set of embedded metadata. They are endorsed by the institution which issues them and recognized on an international level. The information packaged within the badge image file is provided in an open source format and can be shared on social media platforms, as part of an online e-portfolio, as a link on an electronic CV, and on the platform which hosts the badge. The 'Certificate of Competence in English for the Social Services' was introduced by the Turin University Language Centre in 2019 in order to supplement the university credits already awarded for the course. Open Badge certifications are particularly suited to this kind of ESP course for a number of reasons. The detailed metadata provided via the Open Badge format makes it possible to describe training activities which would otherwise go undocumented on the academic transcripts. Then, Open Badges are of a uniquely 'glocal' nature, inasmuch as they are internationally recognized awards tailored by local providers in response to local demands. As such, they are particularly suited to English for professional purposes since, although learners need to be able to share their credentials on international platforms using a common language, it is important that we do not lose sight of the specific characteristics of professional activities at a local level. This is particularly true in the case of the three-year degree programme in "Educazione professionale" at Turin University, which trains students for a profession which would fall under the umbrella term of social work but does not have a direct equivalent in the English-speaking world.

1. Introduction

The present article discusses the motivations for the introduction of an Open Badge certification for a first-year undergraduate ESP course at the Turin University Language Centre. The course in question is part of the three-year degree programme in 'Educazione professionale', a branch of social work particularly concerned with the pedagogical aspects of rehabilitation, which has been jointly run by the Departments of Public Health and Pediatrics, Philosophy, Education and Psychology since 2004, when

the degree was introduced as a requisite for professional practice in the field. The University Language Centre has been responsible for English language training since the launch of the degree programme. As of the 2019-2020 academic year, we have chosen to supplement the three university credits awarded for the end of course exam with a digital Open Badge entitled 'Certificate of Competence in English for the Social Services'. Over the following pages I will explain the motivations behind this choice and suggest that Open Badges are particularly suited to ESP in general and to the activities of university language centres in particular. I will further outline the ways in which Open Badge certifications can provide a valuable supplement to traditional university credits.

2. About Open Badges

Open Badges are online records of achievement which document field-specific, soft and technical skills. They consist in a visual image and a set of embedded metadata which indicate the skill gained or objective reached, the learning process and method of assessment, and provide information about the issuer. They are endorsed by the institution which issues them and recognized on an international level. The information packaged within the badge image file is provided in an open source format and can be shared on social media platforms such as Linkedin, as part of an online e-portfolio, as a link on an electronic file of the candidate's CV, and on the platform which hosts the badge.

Open Badges were first introduced by the Mozilla Foundation with funding from the MacArthur Foundation in the wake of the publication of the 2010 seminal white paper 'Open Badges for Lifelong Learning' prepared by Erin Knight together with collaborators from the MacArthur Foundation and Peer2Peer University and following the fourth Digital Media and Learning Competition of 2011 (See All4 Ed and Mozzilla Foundation 2013). In the following years, the Open Badges Technical Specification 1.1 was drawn up, standardizing the technical features and the structure of the metadata for all Open Badges[1].

2.1. *Open Badges in Italian universities*

In Italy, Open Badges are hosted on the Bestr platform (www.bestr.it) which was developed by Cineca, a non-profit consortium made up of 70 Italian universities, four national research centres, and the Ministry of Universities and Research (MIUR) which aims to support the Italian scientific community through supercomputing and scientific visualization tools. Badges are displayed in an open-source format which is compatible with all the other platforms which issue and display Open Badges in accordance with Mozilla's technical specifications. The Bestr platform defines itself as "the meeting point between learners, employers and trainers" – as seeking to bridge the gap between formal and informal training, the individual trainee and prospective employees. The electronic badge links the prospective employer straight back to the Bestr website and is therefore much more reliable than a simple scan or photocopy of the certifica-

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[1] See http://www.imsglobal.org/sites/default/files/Badges/OBv2p0Final/faq/index.html. See also Crytzer (2018), Kerver and Riksen (2016) and Dowling-Hetherington and Glowatz (2017).

tion. Although Open Badges are a relatively new phenomenon, they are rapidly gaining ground within the Italian university system. In June 2018, the CRUI (Council of Italian University Vice Chancellors) declared Open badges and the Bestr platform a national point of reference for skills certification [2]. As of spring 2020, 15% of Italian universities have issued Open Badges, accounting for 70% of the badges on Bestr. These badges are gaining an increasing level of institutional recognition, with 23% of these badges being eligible for university credits [3]. Looking to the future, the universities of Padua and Milan Bicocca have already introduced fully digitalized degree certificates [4] on the Bestr platform, using the Blockcerts standard [5].

2.2. *The Open Badge Project at the Turin University Language Centre*

The Turin University Language Centre has been the first university organization in Italy to issue Open Badge certifications for specialized language courses. We currently have a portfolio of eleven Open Badges, catering for undergraduate and graduate students as well as members of the university's academic, technical and administrative staff:

> Certificate of Competence in English Medium Instruction (B2 and C1)
> Certificate of Competence in Academic Writing and Presentation Skills (B2 and C1)
> Certificate of Competence in English for Administrative Purposes (B1, B2 and C1)
> Certificate of Competence in English for Research Technicians (B2 and C1)
> Certificate of Competence in English for the Social Services (B1 and B2) [6]

The fact that the 'Certificate of Competence in English for the Social Services' is the only one of these certifications to be issued subsequently to a course and exam which is already accredited by the university perhaps begs the question of what added value the Open Badge award gives beyond the university credits which have already been awarded. In the sections which follow I will present various arguments in favour of supplementing university credits with Open Badges for ESP programmes, ultimately suggesting that this course might provide a useful model for future practice in ESP at a university level.

3. Language accreditation and university examinations

On non-language degree programmes in Italy, English language modules typically carry a relatively low number of university credits (two or three) and such exams

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[2] See "Competenze Crediti Certificazioni", CRUI (http://www.crui.it/archivio-notizie/università-digitale-gli-atenei-al-lavoro-per-un-piano-da-presentare-al-prossimo-governo.html).

[3] See https://www.agendadigitale.eu/cultura-digitale/digital-credential-in-universita-con-open-badge-e-blockchain-i-sistemi/.

[4] www.blog.bestr.it.

[5] Blockcerts is an open infrastructure for academic credentials first developed by the MIT Media Lab Learning Initiative and published on the Blockchain. See Bertazzo and Cacciamani (2018).

[6] For an overview of the project and links to the various Badges, see https://bestr.it/project/show/115?ln=en. A detailed study of the project, entitled "The University Language Centre as an Open-Badge Issuer: New Directions in ESP Assessment and Accreditation" is forthcoming in the 2019-20 Special Issue of the journal *Language Learning in Higher Education*.

rarely have any value outside the university context. Prospective employers, overseas universities and national English-language degree programmes will typically request international certifications such as Cambridge or IELTS exams rather than recognizing English language credits obtained during undergraduate study. It is perhaps for this reason that a growing number of Italian universities have begun either to accept these international certifications as an alternative to in-house training or exams or to directly prepare their own students for these exams, with the university language centre often coming to function primarily as an examination centre for the international examining company. This is the case, for example, at the Turin Polytechnic, which adopted IELTS as its compulsory English exam in 2007.

In this way, Italian universities may feel that they are 'killing two birds with one stone', inasmuch as they are providing high quality language training for their students at the same time as providing them with an internationally recognized certification. However, there are disadvantages to such an approach. Firstly, although international examining bodies offer special prices to students from partner universities, the costs of these examinations remain high enough to represent a further obstacle to students from more disadvantaged backgrounds. This is one of the reasons why partner universities involved in the Erasmus project will now accept language-level certifications from the incoming student's university language centre as an alternative [7]. Secondly, this trend has led to a significant decline in ESP teaching at university level. This, I would argue, constitutes a significant loss, since, in general, the language training which students receive no longer reflects the specific needs of their future profession. At a deeper level, this globalizing trend in language teaching and testing at university level tends to come at the expense of any attempt to convey specific local professional and academic cultures in the target language. International standardization in language training inevitably comes at the expense of localized cultural diversity, and this results in an impoverishment of the resultant international dialogue since it is no longer authentically intercultural.

I would argue that the international recognition which is increasingly being afforded to University Language Centre certifications, combined with the capacity of the digital Open Badge format to package detailed information about specific training and experiences, may present us with a valid alternative. If, instead of replacing in-house training with preparation for an international certification, universities were to supplement university credits with Open Badge certifications, they would be able to offer the added value of international validity without any sacrifice of more localized professional and academic culture (Abramovich *et al.* 2013).

4. Blending the global and the local

Open Badges are internationally standardized credentials awarded and designed by local providers, who tailor certifications to meet specific local needs. Originally conceived of by multinational tech-giants, they are issued by internationally renowned public universities in order to document and accredit training experiences which may

[7] The "Passaporto per l'Europa" project at the Turin University Language Centre, which offers free language testing and certification to all out-going Erasmus students, is an example of such a scheme.

well be unique to the issuer as a consequence of that institution's local context. As such, they constitute a peculiarly 'glocal' form of accreditation.

I consider 'glocality' to be a useful quality for any ESP course, since, surely, these courses can only truly be said to have achieved their objectives if, as well as understanding and absorbing aspects of Anglophone professional culture in the field in question, the student also becomes able to share their own academic and professional outlook. Even where English is being used as a common international *lingua franca*, surely the cultural exchange should flow both ways. Otherwise, to quote Swales' (1997: 374) famous article, English will become a culturally imperialist "tyrannosaurus rex" – "a powerful carnivore gobbling up the denizens of the other academic linguistic grazing grounds". Rather than teaching students how to express and share their own academic and professional culture, ESP becomes rather a means to superimpose an international mono-culture [8].

Indeed, it is worth bearing in mind that students following ESP courses are not necessarily doing so with a view to studying or working in Britain or the United States. Certainly, in the specific case of students attending the 'Educazione professionale' degree course in Turin, student international mobility is very limited, and those graduates who go to work overseas are involved primarily in international projects run by NGOs in developing countries. English is also useful for many of the students who remain in Italy to begin their careers and, indeed, who are already practising social work as undergraduates. However, the students in question are using English in order to liaise with immigrants, refugees and asylum seekers, helping them to navigate Italian bureaucracy and to understand their rights. Again, the professional linguistic needs of these individuals would not really be met by the kind of textbook which might be produced by an international US or UK-based publisher. As David Crystal's (1997) work has taught us, these students will be encountering "Englishes" in the plural, rather than a singular Anglo/American linguistic framework. Ironically, despite its lower budget and more limited resources – and, indeed, precisely because of its smaller scale and more localized perspective – I would suggest that the university language centre is actually better equipped to meet these specific student requirements.

5. Documenting and acknowledging specific skills and experiences

I will now proceed to consider how these glocalized certifications can document and acknowledge locally specific and internationally relevant skills and experiences. I have already mentioned that the transition to recognizing international certifications in lieu of in-house university examinations leads to a decline in ESP training and testing. Where ESP training is available at universities, no documentation of this training is provided on traditional academic transcripts. For example, at the Turin University Interdepartmental Language Centre we currently teach ESP courses for students in social work, agriculture, veterinary science and primary education. All four of these carefully designed, field-specific courses appear on the students' academic transcripts under the single heading of 'Lingua inglese'. There is, therefore, no way for prospec-

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[8] For a further consideration of the ways in which English as an International Language of Science can act as a hegemonic"tyrannosaurus rex" or a liberalizing "lingua franca," see Tardy (2004).

tive employers to differentiate students who have been trained in the specific language skills required for the job from those who have simply followed a general English course at a given level.

On a rather basic but important level, the introduction of Open Badges has enabled the University Language Centre to document the CEFR levels attained by students who have passed the exam. The basic pass-mark level for the exam (which is ungraded) is B1. However, it was felt that the introduction of two distinct badges would provide a much deserved and a potentially very useful recognition for many students who now demonstrate a B2 level in English in the final assessment.

More generally, among the "value propositions offered by Open Badges for Learners" listed by Devedžić and Jovanović (2015: 606), we find "recognition of otherwise under- or non-recognised skills and prior learning". They further add that badges supplement "traditional certification of skill and knowledge mastery", facilitating a "more informed narrowing [of] the pool of job applicants" by prospective employers (*ibid.*: 610). The detailed metadata provided through the Open Badge format makes it easier to document previously uncharted areas of language learning, providing detailed descriptions of highly specialized training experiences. This also means that Open Badges are able to document skills which are vital for effective ESP performance, but which are not always easy to demonstrate and record.

This is particularly relevant in the case of the 'English for the Social Services' Badges, which contain highly detailed metadata precisely because of the unique nature of the training offered. The text published in the link is as follows:

> The *Certificate of Competence in English for the Social Services (B1/B2)* is awarded by the Interdepartmental Language Centre of the University of Turin to students who have attended at least 70% of the taught course in "English for the Social Services" course, who have satisfactorily completed the coursework and who have passed the written and oral exams demonstrating a B1 or B2 level of English.
> The course in English for the Social Services is divided into the following modules:
>
> Introduction to Social Work
> The History of Social Work in Great Britain
> Different Fields of Social Work
> Burnout, Compassion Fatigue and the Importance of Self-Care
> Child and Family Support
> Divorce and child custody
> Teenage pregnancy
> "Looked after" and "at risk" children
> Domestic violence
> Old Age
> Formal and informal care
> Problems faced by older adults
> Ageism and elder abuse
> Reduced autonomy
> Bereavement
> Dementia
> The ageing population phenomenon
> Mental Illness

Overview of common mental illnesses
The multidisciplinary team
Eating disorders
Focus: mental illness and the internet
Addiction and Substance Abuse
Experimental use, recreational use, dependency
Approaches to treating addiction
The debate on legalisation
Poverty and Social Exclusion
Immigration and racism
Austerity and its repercussions
Social housing
Gang culture

During the course, students will need to prepare at least two of the following pieces of coursework in groups:

A brief research presentation on one of the following topics:
The "Baby P Effect on Child and Family Social Work"
The Grenfell Tower Disaster and Social Housing
A brief role-play of the kind that might be used in a peer-education context
A consideration of how online resources can be deployed in social care

Students will only be admitted to the final exam if they have fulfilled the attendance and coursework requirements. The final exam will consist in:

A computer-based written test including multiple choice reading and listening exercises, designed to test the student's knowledge and understanding of the grammatical and lexical content of the course
An oral presentation, using Powerpoint or similar, on a topic of the candidate's choice pertinent to their field of study. The assessment will take into account:
Language accuracy and pronunciation
Content
Structure
Presentation skills
Ability to respond to questions

Overall, the course aims to familiarize students with the core terms and concepts of their field of study in the English language, to invite them to reflect on the contrasts between the social services in Italy and the UK and to acquire the linguistic skills and intercultural awareness that might help them to practise social work overseas or in an international context.

On the basis of this information, prospective employers will have a clear idea of the kind of training the students have received, the issues they have considered and the practical simulations they have undertaken. The use of digital credentials means that it is also possible for students to attach examples of their coursework, which is preserved online on the Language Centre's Moodle platform, to their online CV or digital portfolio. The role-play activities are often particularly pertinent and in the year of writing,

during the Covid-19 emergency, the "deployment of online resources in social care" option has given rise to some highly innovative proposals and descriptions of practice.

6. Flipping the learning process and fostering academic community [9]

Open badge certifications have the further advantage of placing the learner at the centre of the learning process, inasmuch as they are able to reflect the precise professional needs of relatively small subsections of the working population and also since they allow for more ongoing assessment and a greater flexibility in the type of tasks being assessed. Because of their more descriptive nature, badges can document activities such as role-plays and drama and research projects. Such activities enable students to foreground, share and benefit from their existing knowledge of their professional field, becoming active protagonists in the learning process. The language teacher is no longer the only expert in the room, since students also have invaluable knowledge to share with the class. Such activities empower course participants and break down traditional classroom hierarchies which can cause resentment, especially among adult professional students. 'Educatori professionali' were allowed to practise professionally without a university qualification until 2002, so some of these students continue to be somewhat resentful of having to undertake university study in general, let alone non-elective language modules. In general, this re-empowerment of the students is beneficial in mandatory language modules in non-language departments, which are often seen as an unwelcome imposition. Returning for a moment to the paradigms described by Swales (1997) and Tardy (2004), it can help students to recognize English as a *lingua franca* – a vehicle for their own ideas – in a context where the language requirement might otherwise be seen as "tyrannosaurus-rex", distracting them from and refusing to take into account their own academic and professional experiences.

The research and drama components of the course further enabled students to give voice to their own specific field of social work – 'Educazione professionale'. Although the 'Badge' refers to the social services in general, these activities allowed students to approach the various themes in the textbook from the perspective of their own future career, focusing on specific pedagogical-rehabilitative initiatives.

7. Combining hard and soft skills

Another facet of Open Badges which is of particular relevance for this course is their capacity to document 'soft skills' specifically, in this case. The 'Skills' section of the Badge contains the following text:

> The owner of this Badge has acquired the following linguistic knowledge:
>
> Terminology pertinent to the field of the social services
> A rudimentary knowledge of issues pertaining to the social services in Britain
> English grammar (B1/B2 level)

[9] On the concept of "learning community" see Tinro (2003) and Kemp (2010).

The skills acquired during the course include:

Speaking, listening, reading and writing skills in English with particular reference to the field of the social service
Professional / academic presentation skills

Lastly, the owner proved to own the following soft skills:

Teamwork, intercultural awareness, problem solving, empathy, presentation skills, communication skills, paralinguistic skills.

Whereas international language certifications and traditional academic transcripts simply document language skills, the Open Badge format makes it possible to integrate language knowledge with professional and soft skills. This is important in the field of English for Professional Purposes, especially when considering the linguistic needs of professionals such as social workers for whom effective professional communication involves much more than knowledge of grammar and lexis: see Robles (2012) and Kic-Drgas (2018).

8. Conclusion

To conclude, in this article I have sought to demonstrate how supplementing traditional university credits with Open Badge credentials issued by a university language centre can be a valid alternative to recognizing international certifications. I have argued that the 'glocal' character of Open Badge certifications renders them more conducive to a genuinely intercultural dialogue and to the use of English as a *lingua franca*. Their capacity to provide detailed information on the training experience undertaken makes them potentially useful for recruitment purposes. Their digital format means that they can be supplemented with further examples of coursework etc., where relevant. The fact that Digital Open Badges refer to both hard and soft skills makes them particularly useful in the field of ESP, where linguistic skills alone are not sufficient to guarantee effective communicative competence in the language.

The digitalization of teaching and learning resources is leading to an increased globalization of education and the dominance of English is proving a core element in this. I would nonetheless argue that this should not necessarily lead to global standardization of academic culture and practice. The use of Open Badges in ESP shows how, on the contrary, digital credentials can be used to acknowledge and promote local academic and professional expertise within an international framework.

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