The ubiquity of metaphor in academic discourse in English has been shown to be problematic for students whose mother tongue is not English, as they often misinterpret what are –for them– semantically opaque uses of language (Littlemore 2001, 2003). These misunderstandings could have serious consequences for the learning outcomes of students completing part of their university studies at a European university where English is academic lingua franca, as is the case of many Spanish students awarded an Erasmus grant each year. If such students return home having ill understood their lecturers or textbooks, this may well have practical consequences for their academic progress and overall training.

However, international students not only listen to lectures or read textbooks – the academic genres most often focused on this type of research (e.g. Alejo 2011, Low 2010, Low et al. 2008) – they also engage in conversation with their lecturers in seminars, tutorials or office hours’ consultations. To date, however, the role of metaphor in academic dialogue has been largely unexplored. The aim of this talk, then, is to describe the results of a three-year research project that has been looking at how Spanish Erasmus students and their lecturers in 5 different European universities use metaphor in face-to-face conversation. The research aimed to discover how metaphor is used in this particular context of communication, and whether -and to what extent- metaphors may be negotiated and co-constructed (e.g. Cameron 2008) when students seek out their lecturers in office hours to get feedback on their ongoing work or to ask specific questions about their studies. The findings of this research highlight the need for outgoing Erasmus students to be provided with specific training that will (a) familiarise them with the metaphors most frequently used by lecturers when mentoring their students (b) enable them to engage more actively in such mentoring sessions, by repeating, challenging or developing these metaphors, in order to ensure that they are fully understanding the advice they are being given.

References