

Exploring ESP Teachers' Assessment Challenges with First-Year Students

استكشاف تحديات تقييم أساتذة اللغة الإنجليزية لأغراض خاصة مع طلاب السنة الأولى

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Abstract

As a core component of education, the quality of assessment reflects the effectiveness of teaching and learning. Accordingly, in the field of English for Specific Purposes (ESP), assessment plays a crucial role in gauging Students' progress and designing the ESP course. This study aims to investigate the obstacles that ESP teachers encounter when conducting their assessments. It also sheds light on learners' views on the role of assessment in their ESP progress and the challenges they face. To carry out this work, a mixed-methods approach was employed. Findings reveal that lack of adequate training, absence of collaboration with subject specialists, large classes, and insufficient funding are the primary challenges impeding ESP assessment. The results also highlight that most learners perceive that the assessments used have a pivotal impact on their learning quality.

Keywords: assessment; challenges; ESP teachers; First-Year students.

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1. Introduction

Unlike in the early years, nowadays, despite the noticeable emphasis and attention given to assessment in ESP, it remains a big challenge for ESP practitioners. This is due to various reasons, mainly the fact that in most cases, ESP is being taught by general English teachers who are neither familiar with ESP teaching nor with its assessment, which requires competent specialist teachers, as Strevens (1988) describes the ESP teacher as a teacher who “has unexpectedly found him/herself required to teach students with special needs” (p. 41). This causes serious problems and challenges that add more burden to the already quite complicated responsibility of ESP teachers, who not only have to be well-versed in the specific subject but also adapt their instructional methods to meet the specific linguistic and professional needs of their learners. Therefore, the primary objective of this study is to investigate the challenges that prevent the implementation of effective assessment in ESP classes. Additionally, this research aims to examine the views of ESP students regarding the impact of the assessment methods used in their ESP classes and the challenges they encounter on their learning process. To achieve these objectives, three research questions were developed:

- 1) What are the major obstacles do ESP teachers face while assessing their first-year students at the Faculty of Economic, Commercial, and Management Sciences at Belhadj Bouchaib University of Aïn Témouchent?
- 2) How do these assessment challenges impact the overall quality of ESP instruction and these students’ learning?
- 3) What solutions do ESP teachers and students suggest for fostering effective assessment and instruction in ESP classes?

2. Literature Review

After the Second World War, the world witnessed a technological, economic, and scientific revolution led by the United States, which became the world's most dominant nation. The widespread of the American products made English the lingua franca of international transactions, especially in strategic domains like business and science (Crystal, 2003). The US dominance has urged language scholars and educators to think of a way through which they can help students who need English for their specific fields and professions. In this context, Dudley-Evans & St John (1998) claim that the dire need for a focused approach to language teaching that meets learners' diverse needs led to the emergence of English for specific purposes (hereafter ESP).

At the early age of ESP, the focus was only on commerce, technology, and trade. Then, it has been expanded and covered other areas, such as tourism, nursing, law, medicine, finance, and aviation (Paltridge & Starfield, 2013). Since then, various teaching methods have emerged aiming at facilitating the task for teachers to perform their jobs effectively and equip learners with the necessary language skills that help them in their academic or professional fields.

The different fields of ESP learners and their different goals led to the emergence of needs analysis. This is one of the main factors that have distinguished ESP from general English (EGP). Needs analysis is not only considered a starting point according to which the syllabus is designed, but it also represents a reference that helps teachers evaluate their achievements (Douglas, 2013). It is a fundamental tool for any successful language course, and it is not specific only to ESP (Hutchinson & Waters, 1987).

2.1 Assessment in ESP

In education, assessment is a sensitive part of the teaching-learning process. It entails collecting reliable data about student learning to enhance the quality of teaching and

learning (Black & Wiliam, 1998). These data guide educators to assess to what extent their teaching meets the learning objectives and identify their learners' difficulties. According to Brown (2004), effective assessment practices are crucial for improving students' outcomes and informing instructional decisions. This indicates that the assessment methods employed should be carefully selected and proficiently implemented.

One of the core components of the assessment process is feedback. Competent educators should prioritize providing their students with constructive feedback to help them evaluate their progress and successfully achieve their pursuits (Brookhart, 2017). This means that when students are given the chance to assess themselves, they gradually learn to be autonomous. In this line of thought, Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick (2006) assert that quality feedback encourages students to take ownership of their learning and fosters motivation. According to Brown (2004), effective assessment practices are crucial for improving students' outcomes and informing instructional decisions. This indicates that the assessment methods employed should be carefully selected and proficiently implemented.

Assessment in ESP differs from that in general English since it is used for the purpose of evaluating learners' language proficiency and skills within specific contexts aligned with their professional needs. Its aim is to enable learners to use professional language specific to their fields. Relevance and authenticity are the two key criteria of the ESP assessment. Task-based assessment, performance assessment, simulation, portfolio assessment, rubrics and criteria, peer and self-assessment, technology-enhanced assessment, and authentic materials are some of the common strategies used in assessing ESP learners.

2.2 Qualities of an Effective Assessment

2.2.1 Fairness

Fairness in the assessment represents one of the main criteria for a good ESP assessment. It ensures that tasks and activities are always free from discrimination, made

available to all learners, and aligned with their needs and abilities (Suskie, 2009). This essential criterion guarantees that students have enough opportunities to demonstrate their capacities in their specific fields. The grading criteria used in a fair assessment should be consistent and transparent (Popham, 2009). Precise grades in assessment provide an accurate reflection of not only the teachers' competence and efforts but also the learners' true level.

2.2.2 Validity

According to Maree (2010), an assessment cannot be valid unless it effectively measures what it is intended to measure. In the ESP context, a valid assessment is one that successfully measures the learners' language proficiency and skills that are relevant and aligned with their specific professional or academic requirements. It also provides ESP teachers with authentic and precise information regarding their teaching achievements and those of their students.

2.2.3 Reliability

It is meant by a reliable assessment in ESP, an assessment that is consistent and accurate in measuring learners' results and achievements within their specialised contexts. It is free from errors and allows ESP teachers to get credible results that reflect the learners' true language proficiency level. Boud & Falchikov (2007) assert that a reliable assessment yields similar results when repeated under the same conditions.

2.2.4 Authenticity

Traditional teaching methods have consistently failed to meet the needs of students because of their lack of authenticity, which is a fundamental basis for successful and effective teaching. It requires the simulation of real-world activities to guarantee that learners connect their academic knowledge to practical activities to encourage skill development and meaningful learning (McMillan, 2014). In ESP, authentic assessments aim to develop

learners' abilities to enable them to communicate effectively in their professional contexts (Paltridge & Starfield, 2013). Modern alternative assessments promote authenticity in their tasks and activities so they can adapt to the new technological demands of this era.

3. Methodology

This study was conducted using an explorative approach. It seeks to investigate the barriers to effective assessment in ESP classes from both teachers' and students' perspectives. Data were collected through the use of two different research instruments: a questionnaire and a semi structured interview to obtain both quantitative and qualitative data.

3.1. Sample of Research

The sample for this study consisted of two groups. The first group consisted of six first-year ESP teachers at the Faculty of Economic, Commercial, and Management Sciences at Belhadj Bouchaib University in Aïn Témouchent and participated in in-depth interviews. To obtain a holistic view and enhance the validity of this study, the researcher conducted surveys with 90 first-year ESP students randomly selected from the same faculty. Simple random sampling helps reduce systematic bias and enhances the credibility and generalizability of the research results (Brookhart, 2011). Besides, First-year ESP students are not yet specialized and follow the same ESP program designed by their teachers. This helps the researcher analyse and interpret the research findings.

3.2. Instruments and Data Collection

Two main instruments were used for data collection. Qualitative data were collected through conducting semi-structured interviews with six first-year ESP teachers. The interview aimed to explore ESP teachers' assessment practices, shed light on the barriers they face in teaching and assessing ESP students, and present their suggestions for effective assessment in ESP classes. These data were supported by quantitative data gathered through a questionnaire with 90 ESP learners aiming to identify their opinions about the assessments

used in their ESP learning process, the difficulties they face, and their perceptions of what constitutes a good assessment. The mixed methods approach enabled the researcher to cover the perspectives of both teachers and students, who play a pivotal role in the teaching and learning process.

4. Data Analysis and Interpretation

To explore the barriers to effective assessment in ESP classes, comprehensive data collection procedures were employed. It entails analyzing and interpreting the data collected from both the teachers' interview and the students' questionnaire. A questionnaire is a flexible research method that enables the researcher to include a broad population and collect both quantitative and qualitative data. In contrast, interviews are conducted to explore participants' perspectives and obtain in-depth responses (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2007).

The following section will present the analysis and interpretation of the collected data, starting with teachers' interviews followed by students' questionnaires.

4.1 Teachers' Interview Analysis and Interpretation

To investigate the barriers to effective assessment in ESP classes, the researcher conducted interviews with six ESP teachers at the Faculty of Economic, Commercial, and Management Sciences at Belhadj Bouchaib University in Aïn Témouchent. The analysis of the findings reveals that all six ESP teachers have limited teaching experience. Four teachers have less than a year of teaching experience, one teacher a year, and another one two years. In addition, the researcher asked questions regarding teachers' specialty and employment status. Notably, these ESP teachers are part-time instructors specializing either in Didactics or Applied Linguistics, and none of them specialized in ESP. Furthermore, all these ESP teachers declared that they hold a Master's degree and that they did not have any pre-service or in-service training.

Since designing an effective assessment for ESP students requires a thorough understanding of students' needs, sound knowledge of ESP and assessment, sufficient knowledge of the subject, and adequate training, it is a real challenge for these teachers to teach specialized English related to a specific discipline and to design and implement effective assessment targeted to specific ESP students with specific needs.

Concerning the existence of a national common curriculum for ESP in the faculties of Economic, Commercial, and Management Sciences, answers revealed that there is no such a curriculum. This indicates the absence of unified teaching methods, course content, and assessment practices in the different Algerian faculties. Consequently, ESP teachers may face significant difficulties in aligning their pedagogical practices with the linguistic and professional needs of their students. The absence of a common curriculum is a major issue that hinders collaboration among ESP instructors and affects the overall quality of ESP in Algeria.

To gain a clear view of the assessment process, the researcher asked questions about needs analysis. Needs analysis is a fundamental step in the ESP course because it reveals the state of the teaching and learning process. This enables instructors to design suitable and effective instruction and assessment. Three ESP teachers reported that they did not conduct a need analysis at the beginning of the year, while the other three confirmed that they did. This discrepancy shows an inconsistency in ESP instruction, which is detrimental to the success of the overall ESP course. The absence of needs analysis may lead to a misalignment between the requirements of the students' specialties and their assessment activities. This can affect the ineffectiveness of the whole assessment process.

The teachers' responses regarding their students' language proficiency levels show a variation in their opinions. Four teachers described their students' English proficiency as average. This indicates that their students can understand the targeted ESP instruction and

participate in the classroom activities. On the other hand, two teachers saw that their students have poor proficiency levels. This implies that their students have major difficulties understanding and using the language needed for success in their respective fields. These diverse proficiency levels within the same classroom make tailoring relevant and effective ESP instruction and assessment challenging.

The core objective of this research work is to investigate the challenges impeding the implementation of effective assessment in ESP classes, specifically in the Faculty of Economic, Commercial, and Management Sciences in Aïn Témouchent, Algeria. Therefore, the researcher asked the ESP teachers about the significant challenges they face while performing their duties. They identified the major obstacles impeding the implementation of effective ESP instruction and assessment. For these teachers, lack of training represents the first serious problem that prevents non-trained ESP teachers from effectively performing their tasks. Ziani (2018) believes that ESP teacher training has become more than a necessity since English has become the key language of any scientific field. She further adds that the lack of training certainly negatively affects the learners' attitudes towards their target professional language. In addition, all ESP teachers asserted that due to the limited time allocated for the ESP course, their ability to conduct targeted, frequent, and effective assessment that aligns with their students' learning objectives is hindered.

Besides, the lack of collaboration between subject specialists and language teachers represents an additional burden that complicates the ESP assessment. Effective assessments in ESP require an interdisciplinary collaboration between the language teacher and the subject specialists to design reliable assessments. In this regard, Hyland (2006) asserts that the collaboration between subject specialists and ESP teachers ensures the alignment of the language instruction with the learners' future professional demands. Without this partnership, ESP teachers may face significant difficulties while designing authentic

assessments. Therefore, these teachers often find themselves obliged to refer back to the traditional assessment methods, such as multiple-choice questions, true-false statements, and fill-in-the-blank, which are ineffective for the core objective of ESP teaching. Moreover, ESP teachers expressed that the lack of resources is another significant obstacle in varying their assessment activities and implementing authentic assessment that equips their students with the necessary linguistic and professional skills, such as business reports and product brochures.

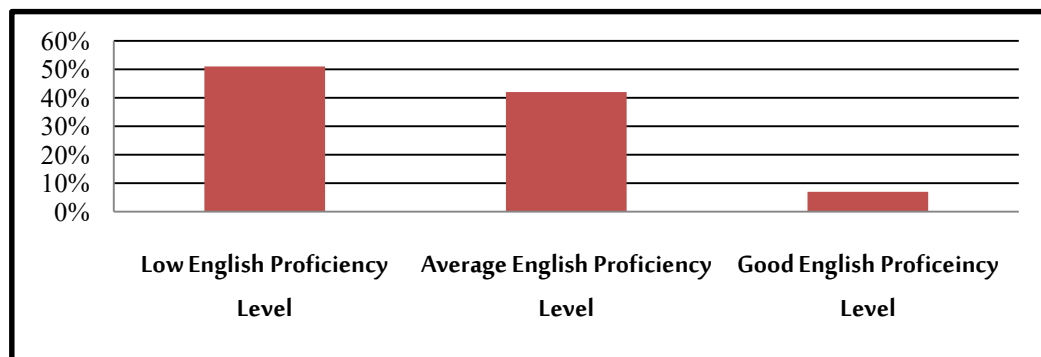
Another prominent burden that seriously complicates the assessment process is teaching large ESP classes. In overcrowded classrooms, it is almost impossible to meet the needs of all students and provide the targeted feedback and support that are necessary for a positive learning environment. In this regard, Kerma (2019) states that oversized classrooms can cause serious problems in the classroom, such as a lack of commitment and a diminished sense of responsibility.

Concerning the development of ESP education in Algeria, all ESP teachers declared that there should be serious attempts to implement significant changes that aim at developing the ESP field. They asserted that specialized English has become an integral component of students' academic and professional success.

4. 2 Students' Questionnaire Analysis and Interpretation

To gain a comprehensive understanding of the assessment barriers in ESP classes, the research conducted questionnaires with ESP students, who are an integral part of the teaching-learning process. Their participation offers a broader perspective on the assessment process and the barriers encountered.

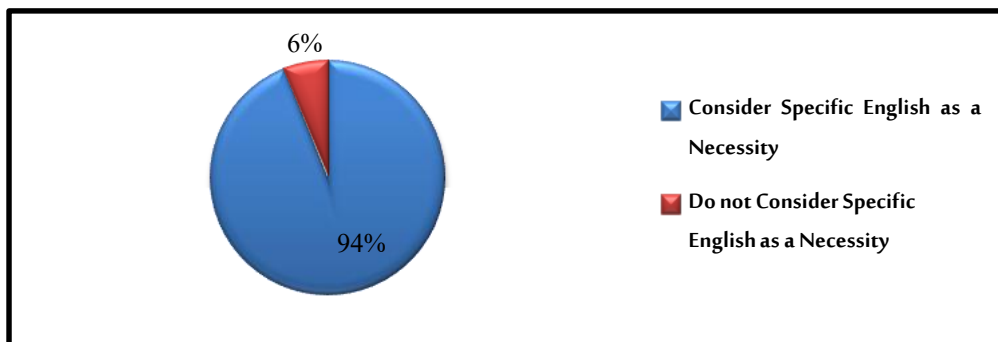
Students' self-assessment of their English language proficiency allows them to reflect on their abilities and identify their difficulties. The following graph illustrates the language proficiency levels of first-year ESP students.

Fig.1. ESP Students' Self-Assessment of their English Language Proficiency

To discover the barriers impeding the implementation of effective assessment in ESP classes, the researcher administered a questionnaire with 90 ESP students randomly selected. The analysis of questionnaire findings reveals diverse students' perceptions of their English language proficiency levels. The majority (51%) of the entire population described their language proficiency as low. This indicates that these ESP students, who represent over half of the population, not only have a basic level of general English but also face different challenges in understanding specialized English necessary for their academic and professional development. On the other hand, a significant proportion of the respondents (42%) rated their proficiency level as average. This result implies that these students have a decent grasp of general English, which may enable them to understand some of the technical vocabulary and perform simple tasks in their respective fields. Additionally, only (7%) of the entire population saw that they have a good English level. This indicates that these students have the potential to excel in their specialized English and their domains as well. These results highlight the fact that the majority of first-year ESP students are in urgent need of tailored instructions and additional support to help them overcome their language deficiencies and develop their language skills. It is crucial to note that the minority of these ESP students should also be given opportunities to foster their skills and ensure their engagement in the ESP classes.

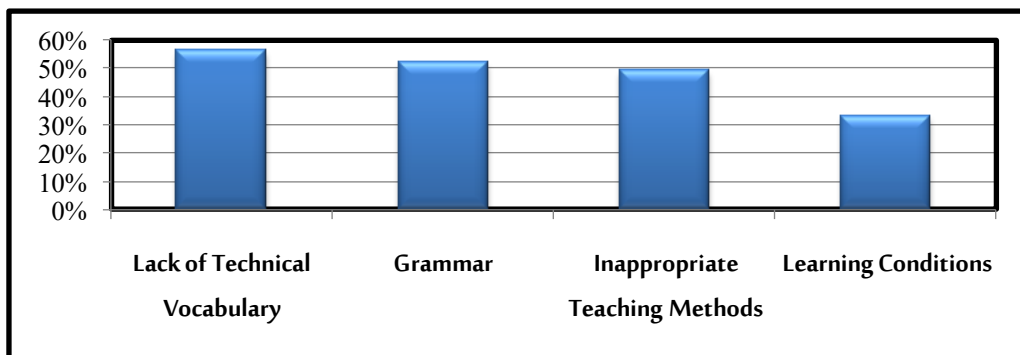
The motivation to study English lies in its utility for learners' academic and professional endeavors. Therefore, the following graph represents ESP learners' views on the importance of ESP in their careers.

Fig.2. Students' Perceptions of the Importance of English for Their Careers



One of the core objectives of this research is to understand students' perceptions of the role of English in their fields. Therefore, the researcher investigated their views on the significance of English for their field. The vast majority of students (94%) considered specific English as a requirement for their future careers. In contrast, a minority (6%) believed that English is not essential for their future success. These findings suggest that these students are aware of the fact that English is the lingua franca of globalization. Being so, it is needed in any international companies, conferences, and business transactions. They also saw that English is one of the main tools that allows ESP students to exchange ideas and skills, expands their business contacts, and provides global opportunities not only in the fields of economy, commerce, and management but also in other academic and professional fields.

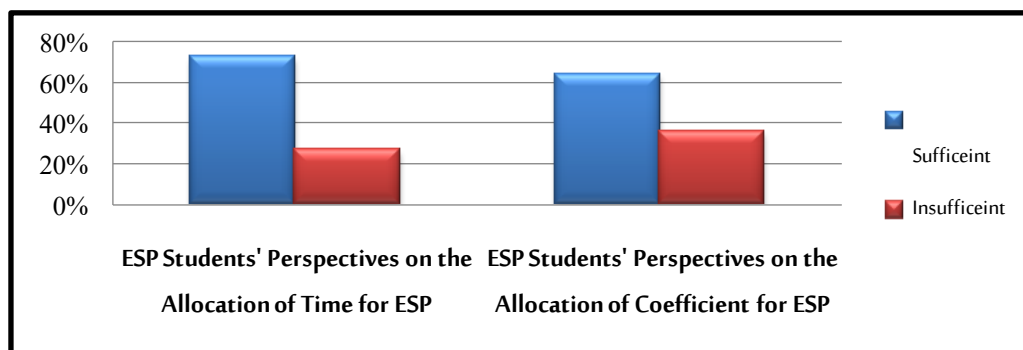
It is paramount to identify the specific challenges ESP students face in developing their English language proficiency. Accordingly, the following graph depicts the barriers ESP students face in their learning process.

Fig.3. Barriers Impeding ESP Learners' Progress

Furthermore, the questionnaire's results highlight several challenges that these students face in their ESP learning process. The majority (56%) reported that the major struggle impeding their progress in ESP is the lack of technical vocabulary. This critical issue has detrimental effects on their academic and professional levels. For instance, they have difficulty dealing with academic texts, participating in professional discussions, and properly completing their duties. According to over half of the population (52%), the inability to use correct grammar represents an additional obstacle that impedes their improvement in their specific English. This not only complicates the task for teachers to successfully achieve their teaching goals, but it demotivates learners as well. Other learners (49%) complained that the teaching methods used by their faculty are not efficient enough to meet their needs. Furthermore, one-third of the population (33%) believed that poor teaching conditions also have a profound negative impact on their learning process. This indicates that inappropriate teaching conditions result into an undesirable quality of teaching. Among these bad conditions are overcrowded classrooms and a lack of teaching materials. These factors eventually create chaos caused by the students' turbulence. Moreover, due to these unsuitable conditions, students can face difficulties concentrating on the course content and accomplish their learning tasks.

Students' perspectives on time and coefficient allocation of the ESP provide insights into the significance of the ESP module in their academic curriculum. The following graph is an illustration of students' views.

Fig.4. Students' Perspectives on Time and Coefficient Allocation



To understand students' views towards ESP, the researcher asked the target population about their opinions on the time and the coefficient allocated to this module. The data analysis reveals that most students are dissatisfied with the time allocated to ESP and the coefficient. An overwhelming majority of students (73%) reported that the time allocated for ESP is insufficient. This indicates that, because of this inappropriate time allocation, students did not have enough opportunities to practice and develop their language skills. This reduces students' contact with their target language and eventually makes them lose their ability to retain what they have learnt. Concerning the coefficient, which represents one of the main stimuli for students' motivation and engagement, over half of the student population (64%) stated it is not adequate. This shows that the ESP module is not given its due importance compared with the other modules in the curriculum.

When asked about the effects of assessment on their ESP learning, most ESP students believed that there is a relationship between good assessment and ESP learning. Almost all respondents declared that if the assessment is designed to meet their specific

needs, it will motivate them to practice and develop their required specialized language skills. In this regard, Wiliam (2011) states that "assessment is, indeed, the bridge between teaching and learning" (p. 46). Good assessment practices enable students to be reflective and identify their shortcomings. This will help ESP students enhance their ESP skills and benefit from the constructive feedback provided by ESP teachers. Moreover, effective assessment helps ESP teachers discover their students' learning gaps and prepare suitable remedial work not only to overcome them but to improve their proficiency level as well.

To have a comprehensive view of the assessment process in ESP classes, the researcher asked ESP students about their opinions on the assessment methods currently used in their ESP classes. Remarkably, the vast majority of ESP students reported that the assessment methods currently used in their ESP classes were predominantly written, which limits their effectiveness. This suggests that, although written assessments are useful in assessing certain language aspects, they do not cater to the diverse needs of ESP students. They should be accompanied by oral activities that stimulate students to practice their speaking and listening skills, as they are essential for ESP students, particularly in the fields of economic, management, and commercial sciences.

When these ESP students were asked about their suggestions for effective assessment, they asserted that the assessment should fulfill their different needs and be aligned with their learning goals. These students believe that the assessment tasks should not merely assess language proficiency; they should be authentic, relevant, and simulate the necessary tasks and activities needed in the economic and business fields. This type of assessment develops the critical thinking and problem-solving skills essential for all ESP students.

Lastly, all the participants in this questionnaire asserted that the ESP field in Algeria needs more attention. These significant findings reveal that ESP students are aware of the fact that mastering the English language becomes a pivotal factor for success, especially in the business and economic fields, where all worldwide transactions are conducted in English. Additionally, the students' views indicate the existence of a mismatch between the future professional and academic needs of their fields and the existing assessment.

5. Suggestions and Recommendations

Based on the findings and participants' insights, several suggestions and recommendations have been proposed to enhance the quality of ESP instructions and assessment and improve students' outcomes as follows:

To ensure quality instructions and assessment in the Algerian ESP teaching sector, it is necessary to provide pedagogical training and organize frequent seminars about new assessment and educational trends to present new perceptions and assessment methods not only in the economic, management, and commercial sciences but also in the other Algerian ESP fields. In addition, it is vital to provide collaboration opportunities between ESP specialists and subject specialists to facilitate the exchange of language skills and content knowledge, leading to the creation of an engaging and relevant environment for ESP students. Moreover, hiring full-time ESP instructors is necessary to ensure consistency among ESP teachers within the field. Due to their experience, they could also be a reference for novice ESP teachers. This responsibility should be carried out by the Algerian Ministry of Higher Education and curriculum designers to ensure the good training of ESP students for the professional world.

As data revealed, most ESP students declared that the classroom activities are primarily written, with limited practice of their speaking skills. To solve this problem, ESP teachers should incorporate different assessment methods, such as role plays, simulations,

presentations, and discussions. Alternative assessments such as project-based assessments, peer assessments, and rubrics help develop students' communicative skills, which are essential for their future careers. In addition, the implementation of frequent formative assessments helps ESP learners practice their language skills in various scenarios and improve their professional abilities. Moreover, ESP teachers should conduct frequent needs analyses to ensure the effectiveness of their ESP course and prepare remedial work to overcome their students' learning difficulties. Furthermore, it is essential to conduct diagnostic assessments at the beginning of the ESP course to form ESP classes with similar proficiency levels in order to make ESP assessments more accurate and effective.

One of the significant solutions to enhance assessment practices and improve the quality of ESP education in Algeria is standardizing ESP teaching in Algeria by providing clear national curricula for the different faculties. These curricula should be aligned with linguistic changes and technological advancements. This could reinforce ESP teaching and learning and serve the Algerian economy by providing proficient employees. Addressing this barrier is imperative because possessing an ESP degree has become a condition for success.

Policymakers are responsible for providing sufficient funding and acknowledging the pivotal role of ESP in the development and success of Algerian students in almost all the different disciplines. This entails encouraging teacher training, establishing connections between the ESP field and other disciplines, and facilitating the use of technology in the ESP field. These suggestions cannot be realized unless ESP teaching is given its appropriate time.

6. Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to determine the critical challenges to effective assessment in ESP classes, particularly for first-year ESP teachers at the faculty of economic, commercial, and management sciences at Belhadj Bouchaib University in Aïn Témouchent. It

also shed light on the negative impact of these challenges on the quality of ESP instruction and students' learning progress. Moreover, it presented teachers' and students' suggestions for effective ESP assessment and instructions.

The data analysis revealed significant challenges hindering the efficacy of learning and the assessment process. ESP teachers reported that the main factors impeding the implementation of accurate ESP assessment and the delivery of effective instructions are lack of training, absence of a curriculum, time constraints, absence of collaboration with subject specialists, large classes, and insufficient funding. They added that these factors prevent them from tailoring effective assessment, providing individualized feedback and conducting frequent formative assessments.

From the students' perspectives, they expressed their dissatisfaction with the learning environment, especially large classes. They also believed that the assessment methods currently used primarily focus on writing skills with insufficient focus on speaking skills. Besides, ESP learners complained about the inadequate time and coefficient allocation of the ESP module. They saw that as a devaluation of the ESP module and a disregard for their needs.

This study highlighted the urgent need for a national reform of ESP education, including the current assessment methods. Key recommendations were suggested to enhance the effectiveness of the ESP assessment and instructions. The implementation of adequate teacher training, the design of a common curriculum, and the provision of sufficient time and funding for the ESP module were proposed as major solutions

Finally, due to the current advancements, having an ESP qualification has become a dire necessity in almost all fields. Therefore, to keep pace with developed countries, the ESP

field should be given more emphasis. This responsibility should be held by both policymakers and ESP teachers to ensure the enhancement of the ESP field in Algeria.

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8. Appendices

A- Teachers' Interview

1. As an ESP teacher, could you please tell us about your teaching background?
2. Is there a national common curriculum for ESP teachers?
3. Did you conduct a needs analysis at the beginning of the year?
4. How do you describe your first-year students' English language proficiency level?
5. What barriers do you encounter in implementing effective assessments?
6. Is there a need for a reform of ESP education in Algeria?

B- Students' Questionnaire

- A- How would you rate your proficiency in English?
- ☐ Poor ☐ Acceptable ☐ Good ☐ Very Good ☐ Excellent
- B- Do you believe that learning ESP is essential for your future career?
- ☐ Yes ☐ No *Why?*
- C- What obstacles do you face in learning ESP?
- a) Lack of vocabulary b) Grammar c) Teaching methods d) Learning conditions
- D- What is your opinion on the time and facilities allocated for English in your field?
- Time:** ☐ Sufficient ☐ Insufficient **Coefficient:** ☐ Sufficient ☐ Insufficient
- E- How does the assessment quality affect your ESP learning?
- F- What do you think about the current assessment?
- G- What would you suggest for an effective assessment?
- H- Teaching ESP in Algeria is not given its due attention. Give your opinion.