



ESP in the Algerian Context: Categorization of Learners and Considerations for Course Designers

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Abstract

In recent years, research on ESP as a learner-centered approach to English as Foreign language (EFL) teaching has gained increasing momentum among Algerian scholars. In this regard, a substantial body of empirical and theoretical studies has been published in the CERIST (Centre de recherche sur l'information scientifique et technique) and ASJP (Algerian Scientific Journals Platform). Most of these studies called for more consideration of the learners' needs when tailoring ESP courses. However, prior work offers no clear practical steps to EFL teachers as major course practitioners and material providers, in order to meet the overall academic and occupational demands of the target learners. Such requirements have significantly grown with the Algerian Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research's desire to implement and improve the use of English in tertiary education. Based on a suggested framework for ESP classification, the prime thrust of the current paper is to introduce and critically discuss the main steps involved in syllabus design with reference to the Algerian context, particularly (a) learners' needs; (b) objectives; and (c) selection of teaching materials and learning activities. For each ESP learners' category, evidence from the meta-analysis of relevant studies are provided. The study concludes by establishing directions for future research.

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1. Introduction

The requirement to learn English is determined by its supremacy over global technological, economic and scientific advances (Crystal, 2003). Likewise, to meet global academic and occupational demands, namely improving higher education institutions ranking and visibility and providing better opportunities for international networking and employability, the Algerian Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research (MHESR) is trying to implement and improve the use of English at tertiary education. While previous reforms within the LMD (license, Master, Doctorate) system introduced English as a compulsory module for almost all subject areas in 2005, recent efforts have led to pertinent decisions to expand the implementation of English through a commitment to ensure tertiary education teacher training in English as a language of instruction (EMI). Conforming to Ministerial Decree No. 1400 (of October 25, 2022), a national commission was created for the purpose of promoting Algerian higher education institution global visibility and ranking. To that end, university teachers specialized in different subject areas were invited to take part in the national English training program project with the aim of preparing them to instruct their syllabi content in English, starting from the following academic year.

Directors of national institutions and universities were induced to provide English for Specific Purposes (ESP) training programs with the help of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers at the level of the various academic institutions including English departments, Intensive Language Training Centers (CEIL) and The University Continuing Education (UFC) (According to correspondence No. 1433 dated on September 28, 2022). Apparently, ESP as an approach to language teaching, that is centered on learners' needs, stands as the adequate approach that can meet the aspired academic and occupational requirements for the current case. The reason for this is that ESP learners are usually adults who have already mastered some knowledge of English and are learning the language needed in a particular domain, occupation, or vocation in order to acquire professional skills and perform particular job-related functions. Nevertheless, EFL instructors, as basic executives of the national project, are encountering numerous problems and challenges in adapting specific courses to cope with this transition era, in a multilingual context where Arabic as a mother tongue and French as a second language have been the predominated languages of instruction at many tertiary education institutions in Algeria, since its independence. Actually, designing an ESP

syllabus or a course tend to be significantly complex where the practitioners should be conscious of the required skills to meet learners' specific needs. A course design, according to Hutchinson and Waters (1987), "is an integrated set of teaching-learning experiences whose ultimate goal is to lead learners to a specific level of knowledge". In this regard, a number of questions are triggered concerning the type of ESP learners for whom the course is designed, goals of the course, the content to be selected, the pedagogical means and procedural sequences to introduce the content, and the source of materials. In other words, what respects should EFL teachers regard, as major course practitioners and material providers? Accordingly, the rationale of this paper is to discuss the theoretical and conceptual considerations for an effective ESP course design, within the Algerian context. Therefore, the current query is motivated by the following research questions:

- a) *How can ESP learners be categorized, within the Algerian context?*
- b) *What major steps should be included in the course design of each ESP category?*

2. Theoretical Framework

In this section, it seems necessary to briefly review the body of related work

that is available on ESP theory before moving to examine its status in the Algerian context.

2.1 An Overview of ESP Definition and Development

Research on ESP has grown as one of the most prominent fields in English language pedagogy to adult learners for a considerable period, ranging from the early 1960's. This interest has been reflected in a multitude of conferences, workshops, and publications devoted to discussing debates that relate to ESP.

Although creating a simple and straightforward definition of ESP has not been an easy task (Strevens, 1988, p. 109), a number of definitions can be traced in the literature. Mackay and Mountford (1978, p. 2) viewed ESP as "teaching English for clearly utilitarian purposes", whereas Robinson considers ESP as the "teaching of English to learners who have specific goals and purposes" (1980). Such goals might be professional, academic or scientific. Similarly, Hutchinson and Waters reckon ESP as "an approach to language teaching in which all decisions as to content and method are based on the learners' reasons for learning" (1987, p.19).

Strevens' (1988) definition makes a distinction between four absolute and two variable characteristics by identifying its absolute characteristics wherein ESP is:

(a) designed to meet specified needs of the learner; (b) related in content to particular disciplines, occupations and activities; (c) centred on the language appropriate to those activities in syntax, lexis, discourse, semantics, etc., and analysis of this discourse; and (d) it is in contrast with General English. For the variable characteristics, ESP may be but is not necessarily restricted as to the language skills to be learned, and taught according to any pre-ordained methodology (Gatehouse, 2001 cf. Strevens, 1998, pp. 1-2).

Dudley-Evans and St. John revisited the definition of ESP by using three absolute and four variable characteristics by acknowledging the necessity to meet “learner’s specific needs” and removing the characteristic mentioned in Strevens’ definition that “ESP is in contrast with General English”. This modified definition has enlarged the range of ESP by allowing it to encompass students’ specific needs that do not necessarily relate to any particular occupation or discipline. Further, Dudley-Evans and St. John (1998) have contradicted this restricted view regarding the scope of ESP by including English for Academic Purposes (EAP) in the realm of ESP.

Throughout its development, ESP has undergone five main phases:

- a) Register analysis: where the focus was on language lexical and grammatical level
- b) Rhetorical or discourse analysis: the focus was beyond the sentence level
- c) Target situation analysis: as the name implies, the focus is on linking language analysis to learners’ reasons for learning
- d) Analysis of Study Skill and Strategies: the focus is on the thinking process that forms the basis of language use
- e) Analysis of Learning Needs: emphasizes the fact that ESP’s main concern is language learning and not language use.

Though the definition of ESP has been an area of controversy; yet, it seems to be a flexible approach to teaching English as a second language (ESL) or as a foreign language (EFL) that is integrally linked not only with special disciplines and occupations but also caters for the special needs in the realm of EAP (Javid, 2013). Hence, it is apparent that ESP is not limited to any specific discipline but is meant for the specific needs of the learners at any course design. One comprehensive, but not necessarily exclusive, classification that covers major ESP areas is the one suggested by

(Dudley-Evans & St John, 1998, p.6) as demonstrated in Figure 1.

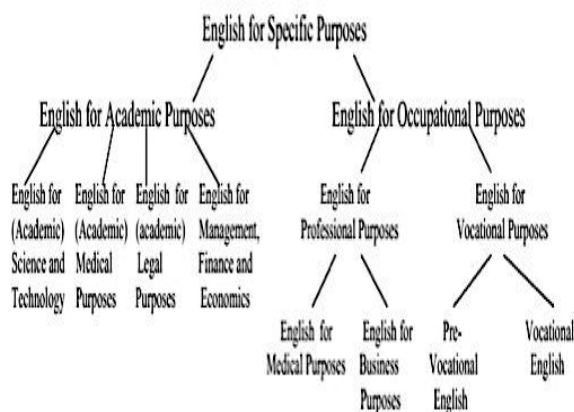


Fig 1. ESP Classification by Professional Area by (Dudley-Evans & St John, 1998, p.6)

In the Algerian context, multiple studies have been conducted to investigate various issues related to ESP. However, very few researchers attempted to categorize ESP learners. In this respect, Rouaghe (2016, p.20) suggested a model (Inspired from Howard & Brown 1997) to describe the status of ESP in Algeria as shown in Figure 2. Accordingly, ESP can be divided into three main categories followed by other subdivisions: Academic (for undergraduates and postgraduates), Vocational/Professional (either in private schools or free paying national institutions) and

sociocultural (in private schools or home-tutor)

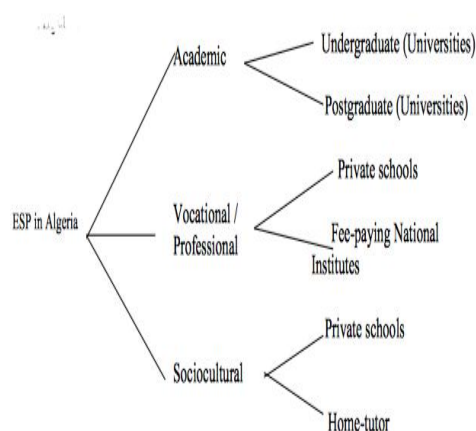


Fig 2. ESP in Algeria (Rouaghe, 2016,p. 20)

Given that categorization is practically so, it principally relates to learners' needs which is the first and foremost step in any course design.

2.2 Course Design

Course design can be regarded as the process of elaborating an educational program (including teaching materials and learning activities and assignments) to achieve desired goals, based on learners' academic or professional needs. Course Design has been a major issue in the context of ESP for many language instructors, practitioners and researchers. According to Hutchinson and Waters, course design is "the process by which the raw data of learning need is interpreted in order to produce an integrated series of teaching-learning experiences, whose ultimate aim is to lead the learners to a particular state of knowledge." (1987, p.65). Consequently, course design

comprises how a syllabus will be carried out in terms planning tasks, activities and language components in line with the learners' needs and expectations (Richards et al., 2002). In the same vein, Dudley-Evans and St John (1998, p. 145) listed the main features of ESP course design and recommended useful steps that practitioners should consider when designing courses for ESP learners.

Several studies are reported in the literature addressing the approaches and steps involved in course design. Nevertheless, most of these models have some points in common, that EFL practitioners should consider. These points are listed by Graves (2000), as the follow:

- a. Conducting needs analysis
- b. Determining the goals and objectives of the course.
- c. Conceptualizing the content
- d. Selecting and developing materials and activities.
- e. Organising the content and activities.
- f. Evaluating

The point of departure in any course design is undoubtedly "Needs Analysis". The term "Need", can be conceptualized as "the gap between what is and what should be" (Brindley 1989, p. 95). Similarly, Ornstein and Hunkins (1998, p.74) defined needs analysis as " a recognized and accepted discrepancy

between a current state and a desired state".

It is worth noting that the aim of the present paper is to provide EFL practitioners, regardless of their in-depth knowledge and understanding of the ESP approach, with the basics of course design within the Algerian context. A detailed description of the steps is presented in the conceptual framework.

3. Methodology

In order to answer the research questions outlined above, this paper uses an adapted model of ESP classification in Algeria according to the main categories of learners (Inspired by Dudley-Evans & St John, and Howard & Brown 1997; Rouaghe, 2016). The study uses library research or literature review which is a series of studies relating to the ESP field whose research objects are explored through library information, namely articles and doctorate theses published in ASJP and CERIST besides pedagogical aids/ manuals posted on universities digital space, after a span of years following the national reform, in 2005. The study is descriptive wherein the researcher attempts to dig up data and examines currently occurring practices related to designing ESP courses for the various learners based on the NA process. Our overall scrutiny of the present status of ESP suggests a preliminary categorization of ESP learners as

demonstrated in Figure 3. Apparently, learners can be streamed into four major categories:

- a. Learners of ESP as a discipline: this is the case of undergraduates and postgraduates majoring in English at universities
- b. Learners of ESP for academic purposes: this is the case of doctoral students and university teachers using English mainly for conducting and publishing research
- c. Learners of ESP for occupational/vocational purposes: the case of various learners in public or private institutions and schools learning English to perform their target situation tasks
- d. Learners of ESP in different disciplines at university or English as a medium of instruction EMI (current project of the ministry).

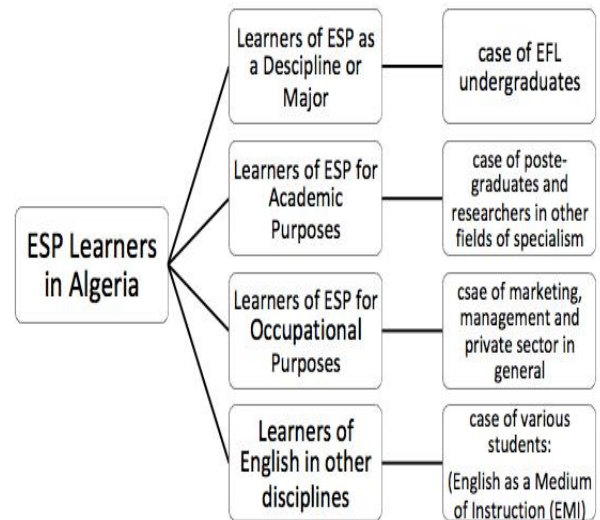


Fig 3. Suggested Classification of ESP Learners in the Algerian context.

4. Discussion

Based on the proposed conceptual framework for classifying ESP learners in the Algerian context (Figure 3), we now describe the related work that supports our proposed categorization by reference to three main areas relevant to course design, for each category, namely the objective of the course, teaching materials and learning activities.

4.1 Learners of ESP as a discipline (EFL undergraduates and Postgraduates)

The first category of ESP learners within the Algerian context is linked with “ESP as a discipline or a university course for EFL learners”. It has been introduced first in the Algerian higher institutions after the national LMD reform in 2004 (Belamri, 2020, p.44). The course is usually designed for Master level students whose major discipline is English as a Foreign

Language (EFL). The ESP course, in this case, is intended to relatively assist, students to become practitioners and course designers for specific purposes. Needs Analysis as a first and foremost step in course design, is predefined by the Canevas.

- **Aim of the course:** to introduce the theoretical background of ESP as a learning-centered approach in order to raise students' awareness and interest in ESP as a branch of research in EFL. In other words, the prime objective is to prepare EFL learners to be course designers/researchers in the field of ESP. Accordingly, learners are expected to be able to identify the major concepts in ESP namely needs and needs analysis, the origins of ESP, its development, its major approaches and substantial branches.

Within the same vein, in the preface of her manual for teaching ESP to Master students, Rouaghe (2019, p.2) stated that the main objectives of ESP course are to be manifested in learners' ability to:

- o Define Needs and Needs Analysis
- o Be familiar with the most common data collection tools;
- o Define ESP

- o Discuss the origins of ESP and its development;
- o State the special characteristics of ESP programs;
- o Make the difference between language skills under ESP and under EGP;
- o Be au fait with what the field of EBE (Business English) may require;
- o Approach a genre based analysis to business discourse;
- o Go through curriculum and syllabus construction by doing an ESP course design project such as designing appropriate courses for specified groups of ESP learners;
- o Conduct analyses of the communicative and linguistic needs of specific groups of learners.
- o Analyze given scenarios of a group of learners and depict challenges and solutions as far as target and learning needs are concerned.

Course materials : teaching aids for presenting the content of this course are varied. EFL instructors and practitioners may depend on a number of references that constitute of the theoretical basis of ESP as an approach to course design such as (Hutchinson & Waters, 1987 ; Strevens,1988 ; Howard & Brown, 1997; Dudley-Evan & St. John 1998).

Learning activities : EFL practitioners and instructors of this course may select a range of authentic learner-centred activities drawing on the course major aims, such as conducting needs analysis for various categories of learners, doing mini-assignments for each ESP approach, analysing scenarios of a group of learners to depict challenges and solutions, analysing academic and professional genres, designing appropriate lesson plans, courses and syllabi for specified groups of ESP learners.

4.2 Learners of ESP for Academic Purposes

The second category of ESP learners within the Algerian context constitutes of ESP Learners for academic purposes. Doubtless, with the growing urge for improving international visibility and ranking of local higher education institutions, scholarly publication in scientific journals is gaining recently demanding impetus for doctoral students and researchers. For the former, it stands as a major condition in the defense of doctorate thesis and post-graduation. For the latter, it plays a vital role in the professional career, promotion, and scientific achievement in whole. The increasing interest in this field is

motivated by a need to improve academic and publication skills in English students and researchers, regardless of their field of specialism, so that they can communicate their ideas and findings appropriately and establish membership in the academic discourse community. Accordingly, Slougui commented on the importance of English in scholarly publication :

“ As a result of the hegemony of English over the world scientific production, a restricted system of communication has established itself, threatening visibility, limiting opportunities, and excluding non English speaking scientists from mainstream“ (2009, p. iii)

A range of studies have been conducted to investigate issues of scholarly publication by Algerian researchers (Slougui 2009 ; Aggoun 2018 Mezrag & Merrouche ,2020 ; Slaim, 2020). This issue was addressed from a dual perspectives, with the researchers dividing it into discursive challenges, covering language, style, rhetorical structure, and the effect of mother/ first language (L1) on foreign or second language (L2) ; and non-discursive challenges, including funding, native speakers vs non native speakers analogy, and editor and reviewer bias (Slougui, 2009 ; Slaim, 2020). Subsequently,

implications from previous research suggest that language teachers can positively play an important role in learners' acquisition of EAP skills. By analysing needs, they can develop a coherent course and sequence of appropriate tasks and teaching methods. Designing EAP courses for this category of ESP learners could stand on these elements :

Aims of the course : to raise learners' awareness of the principles of scientific work and research articles (RAs) in their discipline. Therefore, learners could be trained to present, organize, and analyze data following the moves and steps of RA's sections as well as the arrangement of information within each move. In a word, these should equip them with a linguistic and organizational competence that help them write a scientific manuscript in an expert way.

Course materials : practitioners may adopt a variety of teaching aids for their courses with a special focus on the structure of RA using rethorical /genre based approach. Practitioners may employ models derived from successfully published articles in well-reputed indexed journals, as authentic resources. One of the published materials, that proved to be effective in assisting learners of EAP to

approach this task, is the one of Swales and Feak (1994) that includes practical steps in teaching the different sections of RAs.

Learning activities: Given that an EAP course design aims at meeting learners' specific skills in scholarly publication particularly writing research articles, teaching tasks strive to be as authentic as possible. Therefore, the practitioner may include activities about:

- The various models suggested in literature to write research articles like Swales' move-based model(1994)
- Parphrasing techniques in order not fell prey to plagiarism
- The integration of technology in academic writing (eg : parphrasing softwares, writing check software)
- Collocations in academic writing.
- Besides, presentation skills to present and share research findings in academic confrences.

4.3Learners of ESP for Occupational/ Vocational purposes

The third category of ESP learners comprises pre-and in-service learners in both public and private settings learning English to perform their target situation tasks for occupational or vocational purposes. This category, which has

received much interest among Algerian researchers, may include learners of English for medical purposes (Tebbani, 2019; Talha & Benhattab 2022; Romane & Bagloul, 2022), English for business and commerce (Boudinar, 2021), English for aviators (Rouaghe, 2016), English at certain vital economic workplaces, like oil companies (Beddiaf & Bensafi, 2018; Assassi, 2021; Doufene & Keskes, 2023;). Most of this published research focused on the evaluation of existing ESP courses and called for more considerations of learners' needs analysis in public institutions to prepare them for the requirements of the workplace. Other researchers stressed the importance of bridging the gap between academic and professional practices (Tiaiba, 2023; Tiaiba & Nedjai 2020-2022; Bendoukha & Belkheir, 2023). Although, there is no standard course that can fit the needs of this category of learners in our present classification; yet, recent theoretical and empirical investigations revealed a common point among these tailored courses that ought to suit the requirements of the evolving needs of the workplace using appropriate teaching methodologies. In this respect, Boudinar states:

“The professional profile of a modern qualified employee should include appropriate communication skills and acceptable English language proficiency to cope with the modern

competitive global work arena.”
(2021: p 329)

To exemplify a model of a course design for this sort of learners, it is worth referring to the work of Boudinar (2021), who experimentally ascertained the effectiveness of using innovative pedagogies namely the Problem-based approach (PBA) in teaching Business English to Human Resources Management (HRM) First year Master students. Based on the outcomes of the NA process, the course objectives, materials, and activities were determined. A detailed description of the course steps is given next.

Aims of the course: the major aim of this course is to equip the learners with the necessary target skills besides linguistic and contextual business knowledge they need in order to communicate effectively in academic and professional settings. Subsequently, a number of objectives were listed in which learners were expected to:

- Use a relevant, adequate and appropriate range of Business vocabulary and expressions related to Human Resources Management.
- Use accurate spoken grammatical rules correctly (for instance; correct sentence structure, word order within utterances, and correct use of tenses).

- Demonstrate intelligible pronunciation including correct use of the sound system, intonation, and stress patterns.
- Speak fluently adopting a reasonable rate of speech where they can express a range of functions effectively and appropriately according to the context.
- Effectively manage presentations and interaction in discussions (Boudinar 2021, p. 184).

Course materials: following the aims of the course, a miscellany of specialized business course books, articles from professional journals, and websites could be adapted. Among those materials, Boudinar (2021) mentioned Intermediate Market Leader 3rd edition collection, Business English Course book (Cotton, Falvey & Kent, 2010), Business English Student workbook (Cotton, Falvey & Kent, 2010), Business English Teacher's Resource Book, CD Audios (Mascull, 2010), in addition to articles retrieved from relevant websites to help in assignments in English for Managers (Sostavitel' E.V. Aristova, 2009).

Learning activities: a basic feature of PBA is that, there are no wrong or right

answers for the learners as the prime aim was to learn actively; learn for a purpose; learn how to share knowledge; learn from others and help others to learn. A variety of tasks and learning activities can be used to allow the integration of speaking skills, highlighting grammar constructs, and lexicon required for the Management domain such as:

- answering quiz questions,
- reflecting on difficult decisions, prioritizing options and completing charts,
- using case studies and scenarios based on realistic business problems or situations,
- presenting essential business vocabulary and collocations in context,
- Using role plays to enhance communication skills in the key business areas of making presentations, meetings, negotiations, telephoning and social English and the forth

4.4Learners of ESP as a Medium of Instruction EMI

The final category of ESP learners in this preliminary classification, which is currently a priority interest for the Algerian Higher Education Ministry, includes learners of ESP as a medium of

instruction (EMI). As the name entails, EMI refers to “using English as the primary medium of instruction in educational institutions where the learner's first language is not English” (Macaro, 2018). The Algerian national project of implementing English as a medium of instruction in different disciplinary domains is motivated by a set of objectives particularly promoting global visibility and ranking of Algerian universities, besides providing better opportunities for international networking and employability. According to Galloway et al, the reasons for implementing EMI at tertiary education, in many non-speaking English countries, are multiple including:

“gaining access to cutting-edge knowledge and increasing global competitiveness to raise the international profile; increasing income; enhancing student and lecturer mobility; enhancing the employability of graduates’ international competencies; improving English proficiency; reflecting developments in English language teaching (ELT); using English as a neutral language; offering EMI for altruistic motives” (2017, p. 4).

As the EMI project is still in its cradle in the Algerian context, literature regarding hands-on practice in terms of course

design for their faculty staff is relatively scant. A few studies investigated students and teachers perspectives of EMI in tertiary education (Saidani & Afkir, 2023; Ouarniki, 2023). Unlike the aforementioned training courses for the ESP learners' categories that share some common features, few case studies described the practice of EMI teacher training or course design. This is because EMI teacher training courses are heavily context-dependent and there is no one-size-fits-all approach (Galloway et al.,2017) .Therefore, a possible option for Algerian EMI course practitioners is to study the best practices of other universities such as European and Asian ones, where the EMI agenda has been developing since the 1990s (Volchenkova & Kravtsova, 2021). The content and forms of EMI teacher training courses vary according to the fields of specialism. Of the various reported professional development models that has been successfully implemented in other EMI contexts, the Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL), is undoubtedly, the most prominent one (Ouarniki, 2023). Besides the NA process, which remains an indispensable step in any course design, it is essential to consider learners’ attitudes and beliefs as

they can considerably affect the course content and procedures. Substantially, the CLIL approach stands on the following elements :

Aims of the course : to improve teachers language proficiency and develop subject-specific pedagogical skills, which are crucial for effective EMI teaching.

Course materials : involves the integration of language learning and content learning, with a focus on developing both language and subject-specific skills such as concept of EMI, EMI strategies, Instructional design, intercultural skills, pedagogical issues, digital and linguistic tools .

Learning activities: including workshops, seminars, peer coaching and online studies. Also, ongoing, collaborative, and context-specific professional development is critical for enhancing teachers' language proficiency, content knowledge, and pedagogical skills.

One important remark that should be made, thus far, relates to the assessment in course design that stands as a central part of any ESP course design. In the afore-suggested courses, both formative and summative assessments should be used. However, with respect to learning skills, formative assessment should prevail since providing feedback is essential in the

learner-centred approach. As for summative assessments, it has been overlooked as it goes beyond the scope of the present paper.

CONCLUSION

As a conclusion, though approached from a restricted scope, namely in terms of the reviewed published research, this paper reveals a preliminary classification of ESP learners', for the purpose of assisting practitioners in tailoring specific courses within the Algerian context. It has documented several key contributions that were made to the field of ESP by Algerian researchers. Accordingly, four main streams appeared: (a) ESP as a university course for EFL undergraduates and post-graduates, (b) ESP for academic purposes, (c) ESP for occupational/ vocational purposes, and (d) of ESP in different disciplines at university or English as a medium of instruction EMI. Evidence from previous and current practices was presented regarding the possible goals of each course, the content to be selected, the pedagogical means, following the learners overall academic and professional needs analysis, which remains an indispensable step. Findings of the present paper allow rethinking EFL teachers' roles and improving the academic and scientific practices. Further research is needed to

consider the aspects of formative and summative assessment. Additionally, it is crucial for stakeholders to consider developing interdisciplinary collaboration between language and content specialists in the various field of specialism and to ensure continuous professional development (training trainers to tailor specific courses). Additionally, ESP pedagogy could be improved through the integration of ICTs and other digital skills deemed relevant to the field (Bouguebs et.al , 2023). Eventually, providing national platforms for the exchange of course materials and teaching aids in ESP could be of great help to assist practitioners and the national project executives in their tasks.

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