

## An Investigation on the Linguistic Gap among University Students

### دراسة الصعوبات اللغوية لدى الطلبة الجامعيين

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**Abstract:** The present paper intends to identify students' miscellaneous difficulties in technical modules that researchers are trying to investigate at the level of the Department of Economics Sciences and Management at University Djillali Liabes of Sidi Bel Abbas. Linguistic complication had a substantial impact on first year Economics Sciences students' perceptions of the specific terms and the linguistic problems while using the French language. The main findings of the results are reliable with some current recommendations that students' lower performance in technical basic modules reflects extra cognitive demands, which are strongly linked with text comprehension. A description of data collection procedures as well as the results and discussion of the students' questionnaire are presented. Then, the objectives of the Economics Sciences and Management Department at University Djillali Liabes of Sidi Bel Abbas are evoked.

**Keywords:** Technical Modules; Economics Sciences and Management; French Language as a First Language; Students' Difficulties.

الملخص: يهدف هذا المقال إلى تحديد الصعوبات اللغوية المتنوعة التي يواجهها الطلاب في الوحدات التقنية والتي يحاول الباحثون معالجتها على مستوى قسم العلوم الاقتصادية والتسيير في جامعة جيلالي ليابس بسيدي بلعباس. إذ لوحظ أن لهذه الصعوبات تأثيراً كبيراً على تصورات طلاب السنة الأولى في علوم الاقتصاد للمصطلحات المحددة والمشاكل اللغوية أثناء استخدام اللغة الفرنسية. وانتهت الورقة البحثية ببعض التوصيات المتعلقة بالأداء المنخفض للطلاب في الوحدات التقنية الأساسية والتي تتطلب معارف إضافية، ترتبط ارتباطاً وثيقاً بفهم النصوص، مع تقديم وصف لإجراءات جمع البيانات بالإضافة إلى عرض نتائج ومناقشة استبيان الطلاب المقترح في ضوء استحضار أهداف قسم العلوم الاقتصادية والتسيير بجامعة جيلالي ليابس بسيدي بلعباس. الكلمات المفتاحية: الوحدات التقنية؛ علوم الاقتصاد والإدارة؛ اللغة الفرنسية كلغة أولى؛ صعوبات الطلاب.

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## 1. Introduction

This paper aims mainly at investigating students' truncated performance in technical modules while focusing on French language as a major tool of learning. It encompasses an empirical study, which looks into some contributing factors to students' reticence. To helpfully find answers to the research questions that motivate the present study, an analysis and an interpretation of data collected by the researchers are consisted of a questionnaire for the Economics Sciences students and a classroom observation with some teachers of technical modules at the level of the Department of Economics Sciences and Management at University Djillali Liabes of Sidi Bel Abbes.

While technical modules such as Descriptive Statistics, Micro Economy, General Accountancy, which are based on mathematics are considered as language free in several ways, all of them are basically contingent on language (Barwell, 2008). This is probably one of the major reasons, which make such a kind of correlation between the basic technical modules and the French language become nowadays a central point of discussion amongst the cognitive, social, cultural, epistemological and political researchers. The latter, indeed, have become more enthusiastic to know about the real causes that lead to students' deficiencies in understanding technical modules while dealing with the French language as a means of instruction. In this sense and as it is the case in our Algerian universities, many investigations have revealed the problems of misunderstanding and confusion among students. In fact, the major results obtained from students' questionnaire and the classroom observation prove that students' weak mastery of French as a first foreign language in Algerian universities is the principal reason behind such a failure, the fact which further undermines their learning abilities. Therefore, the research questions that guide this study are the following:

- 1- How can French language enhance students' understanding of basic specific modules?
- 2-How do students behave towards the use of French language?
- 3-How is it possible to find a link between the specific modules complexities?

### **A Description of the Linguistic Situation in Algeria**

Most of the Algerian population use different languages while communicating in many different ethnic groups and regions. Classical Arabic, Tamazight and French language are considered to be the greatest spread languages beside a variety of dialects. What is evident also is that Algerian dialect is considered to be the greatest common language used by Algerian people in their daily life. It is characterized mainly by a mixture of several languages such as Arabic, Tamazight, French and Spanish etc.... However, Algerian families are well known by their frequent use of Algerian dialect as

it is found in all whole of Algeria with some big differences at the level of accent, words and expressions.

As it is known, the linguistic medium of instruction at Algerian schools is Classical Arabic and children are asked to learn also different languages but Classical Arabic is principally used in a written form like in exam papers and class copybooks unlike its spoken form which has undermined through time. It is pertinent to mention that with the permanent use of Algerian dialect inside and outside of schools, it becomes impossible for both teachers and students to use Classical Arabic alone. French, which is also a crucial first foreign language in Algeria, is taught to Algerian pupils at primary schools from grade 3 to grade 12. But with the spread use of Classical Arabic at schools and because of certain limitations as far as the availability of teachers is concerned mainly during what is called the black decade in Algeria between 1990 and 2000, French language deteriorated. Indeed, the period was characterized by a lack of a considerable number of teachers of French language in different regions of Algeria, the fact, which most of time resulted in schools without having French courses for many years. In such a critical situation, English as a second foreign language in Algeria has started gradually to play a major role particularly with the spread of internet, the massive use of computers, the cell phones and the social media stimulating learners to marginalize the French language. All in all, it can be deduced that at the end of high school level, it is occasional to find Algerian students with enough abilities to write correctly and to speak fluently the French language.

## 2. Literature Review

The main target of this research work is to explore the various difficulties amongst first year Economics Sciences students, when they study the technical basic modules in French as a first foreign language. Indeed, language has an impact on students' abilities, which may cause a variety of difficulties. According to Durand-Guerrier et al. (2016): "The main trouble that can be noticed while interpreting formal statements in their native language is that students might be really deteriorated, when using French language as a medium of instruction". That is to say students do not feel comfortable, when they study using the French language. However, students might suffer from the perception of the new technical words and mathematical notions they have already used in their mother tongue. For Schleppegrell (2007, p.142): "learning the new vocabulary that is centrally mathematical may be easier than learning the technical meanings for words that students already know in other contexts". What can be efficient for students is to let them use a language, then, their desire of knowledge would be fertile and fruitful. In the same context, Ferrari added:

At college level, there are few opportunities to put into practice long term activities aimed at improving linguistic skills. Requiring high degrees of correctness to students with a poor linguistic back ground just means inducing them to learn by heart or to use stereotyped expressions with no understanding (Ferrari, 2004, p.389)

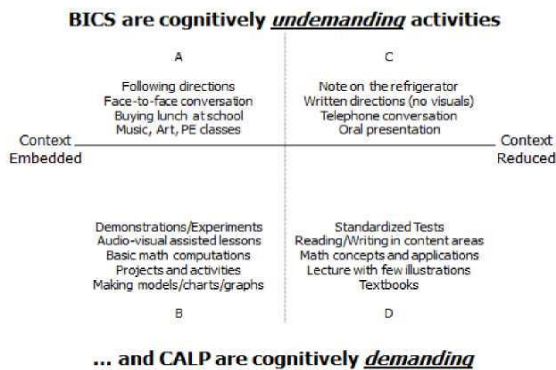
The most popular problem among first year Economics Sciences students is that when they do not master French language as a foreign language, they do not succeed to communicate with their instructors in the two productive skills notably the written and the spoken ones. Frequently, it is these two parts that are uttered in a highly and vastly academic language. In this sense, Fillmore stated that: "the language of textbooks and instruction frequently calls for a high degree of familiarity with words, grammatical patterns and styles of presentation and arguments that are wholly alien to ordinary informal talk" (Fillmore, 1982, p.6). In addition to that, Cummins (1980, p.43) has recognized the difference between Basic Interpersonal Communicative Skills (BICS) and Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP) as "the manipulation of language related to literacy skills in academic situations". One of the very key matters is the evaluation of students' attainment when made in French language. Indeed, researchers have shown in various investigations that the major inappropriateness of tests is due to the language that students do not assimilate. (Cuevas, 1984).

### 3. Theoretical Framework

As it was previously mentioned, first year Economics Sciences students have a tendency to confront many linguistic obstacles, when studying in French language. It should also be mentioned that it is pertinent to help this category of learners to adapt themselves with this competitive society. However, it is time to Algerian universities to design French for Specific Purpose (FSP) courses that can prepare learners for future professional communication. In fact, FSP programs would give enough importance on developing students' competence in specific domains such as trading, banking and all commercial activities. They would also make students ready to work in specific fields such as productive companies that are correlated with the local and the external economy of the country. Furthermore, it is so crucial to make a survey on how undergraduates shift from Arabic to French language and what are their reactions toward their teachers' conversation as well as the written lectures in French language. In Cummins' theory formal and informal language is differentiated as being correspondingly Basic Interpersonal Communicative Skills (BICS) and Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP). BICS is defined as: "the extent to which an

individual has access to and command of the oral and written academic registers of schooling” (Cummins, 2000, p. 67). In other words, it is the aptitude use of the language as an instrument of instruction in a successful way. The main objective of Cummins’ expanded conceptions is the implementation of two major types of communication, which depend on a text in which it is complicated: context reduced communication as well as context-embedded communication; both of them are characterized by academic language proficiency and concern conversational fluency. The core role of context-embedded communication is to prepare both of the reader or the listener using a kind of basic accountancy calculation, gestures and some practical images for the purpose of making the information understandable. Contrary to this, context reduced communication gives less support to understanding. Additionally, Cummins has shown a kind of alteration between what is called cognitively demanding and cognitively undemanding communications. He has focused that contexts of CALP are cognitively demanding contrary to BICS, whereby contexts are cognitively undemanding as it is explained in the following fig1.

Fig1. BICS and CALP (Cummins, 2000)



What can be noticed in Cummins’ theory is that it is advanced by his independence hypothesis, which recommends that the better level of academic proficiency needs to be developed by the first language. At this level, the transmission of the receptive and productive skills passes automatically to foreign language. What is expected from our investigation is that for first year Economics Sciences students, BICS in French language are supposed to be poor. This situation is going to influence directly the progress of the students’ CALP and the few number of undergraduates, who have succeeded to make their BICS better than it is in French language are supposed also to make enough

time so as to ameliorate their CALP. What can be supposed also is that, students' low performance in mathematics and accountancy in basic specific modules while using Arabic language in high school is due to the abridge in management of formulas and algorithms in mathematics, which do not really necessitate such a high level of academic proficiency in general. Subsequently, first year Economics Sciences students are facing such linguistic complexities of crossing from context-embedded tasks (B quadrant in Figure 1) to context-reduced tasks (D quadrant in Figure 1), which is considered to be the most difficult one for university students.

In this sense, teacher modeling is viewed as the crucial process of instruction, whereby the teacher is planning to make the strategy clearer by showing how to apply it in a successful manner. Indeed, the main target of modeling is to give students a clear image of a capable student working with the principle of making what is difficult easy, the impossible possible, the implicit explicit and the invisible visible. Duffy focuses on such a strategy stating that:

Not two people process information in precisely the same way. Therefore, modeling how to do a skill or strategy does not mean giving students rules to follow. Your explanation is, instead representative of the thinking one. Students use your explanation as a guide, not as a script to follow (Duffy et al, 2009, p.52)

This kind of strategies, which concern the teacher modeling, can be useful for students as an initial point for increasing their own way of doing it. Thus, it is the duty of the teacher to create a learning environment suitable for his learners.

#### **4. Methodology**

The research methodology is based on an empirical study emphasizing on key elements, which are stated as the following:

##### **4.1. The Setting and the Subjects:**

The target population is first year economics and sciences students, who study at the Department of Economics Sciences and Management at University Djilali Liabes of Sidi Bel Abbas. This investigation aims to examine their main linguistic problems, when studying the basic technical modules in French language. Researchers have tried to gather these complexities from a teacher viewpoint through what is called the observation stage and from the undergraduates' perspective through the main findings from their questionnaire.

#### 4.2. The Design

At first, the researchers have relied on an observation phase for the purpose of detecting the hard conditions under which teachers taught in previous years. Then and because the present paper is intended to give an idea about first year Economics Sciences students' perceptions towards the learning of the technical basic modules in French language; the researchers have prepared a self-completed questionnaire. The enquiry tries to disclose the perceptions of a sample of 66 students surveyed at University Djilali Liabes of Sidi Bel Abbas.

Before ever we advance in presenting additional details; we are at first in need to state the problem exposing our strong minded hypotheses that motivate our research and explain its practicality at the university level. Our attention, however, is based on our sample population learning the specific basic modules in French language. All in all, our paper is based on three major hypotheses that could be stated as follows:

Students' difficulties in technical basic modules might be attributed to their insufficient linguistic competence in French language, their limited and ineffective stock of vocabulary strategies, their lack of writing, speaking, reading, listening and their lack of motivation to learn and study in French language.

Economics Sciences students' low performance in technical basic modules, which are taught in French language is caused by some affective hindering factors like demotivation.

Teachers of technical modules can help students overcome the problem of the acquisition of specific words by using some affective teaching strategies such as facilitation through the use of specific activities.

We have succeeded to drive all the hypotheses stated above from a number of problems we have gathered directly during the observation stage held in the classroom during the first semester of the previous academic year. Eventually, we aimed at establishing a link between the students' attitudes and feelings towards the learning strategies and the technical basic modules, which are taught in French language for the purpose of finding the adequate and appropriate solutions. For such a reason, we decided to take into consideration the students' viewpoints through the data we could gather from the questionnaire we have administered. At this stage, we would like to attract the readers' attention towards the requirement of directing research on the linguistic gap among university students because it will help for the identification of the various hidden students' and teachers' complexities that can be avoided in the future.

The questionnaire has been used as an instrument for data collection because it is the easiest and the most appropriate in this case. Because the students may find difficulties to reveal their impressions and sincere viewpoints towards a system made by the government and applied by the university they belong to; it was more likely to select for them an anonymous questionnaire for they feel more secure and comfortable.

The specific case of the research work is that the researchers decided to work with learners of Economics Sciences branch in an Algerian university setting. We have indeed used a self-completed questionnaire as an instrument for data collection. At first, we have given a number of 66 copies during the second semester's examinations for a better assessment of the specific basic modules taught in French language according to the subjects' lived experience. The process took place in classes, where the students passed their examinations. The administration of the questionnaire was prudently detained. Thus, we have proceeded as follows:

We have selected 66 students randomly to give a chance to every one of them to participate. They were permitted 20 minutes to fill the questionnaire, which consisted of twenty five 25 questions that were ordered from general to specific respecting the chronology of the learning process. All items were related to learning specific basic modules of Economics Sciences taught in French language. A mixture of open and close questions was necessary at this stage because we aimed at guiding the learners in certain questions and collecting their various impressions and attitudes in others.

#### Main Results and Discussions of the Students' Questionnaire

Before exposing and interpreting the results we could gather from the questionnaire addressed to first year Economics Sciences students and as it is the case for any scientific research, we need first to provide the reader with ideas about the different obstacles we have confronted during the stage of observation held during the first semester of the last academic year. These can be grouped in what follows:

It was really hard to master the very important number of students in such a situation at the academic and administrative levels. The piloting process needed at least the half number of students for a better guidance and condition.

The undergraduates' vision of the specific basic modules was delimited to the way of studying Mathematics, National Accountancy and Statistics rather than the contents of the modules. It was noticed at this level that the students do not have a clear image about the positive aspects as well the



outcomes of the studied specific modules taught in French language. They rather observed only their huge responsibility and the trouble they had been facing when learning all that large number of themes.

It was also noticed that the students did not give enough importance to the sessions. They did barely join their training sessions. May be it was due to their unawareness and ignorance of both the importance of these sessions and their personal importance as well.

Many university teachers, who have been teaching the technical modules did not change the schedule and core contents of the lectures' in the subject they teach. However, the new LMD system requires a large revision of the curricula and the new methods of teaching, which serve the needs of not only the LMD system as a new reform but more precisely the students. In fact, the main principle of the LMD system calls for an appropriate coordination and cooperation between the teachers and the students.

The teachers' evaluation of Economics Sciences students during the last year was harsh as teachers used various methods in explaining the lectures and when correcting the tests and exam sheets; the learners had obtained bad marks.

After a statistical reading of the obtained results from the students' questionnaire we have administered and after a deep interpretation of the responses we have gathered; we have reached a conclusion, which can go even beyond our three hypotheses.

In what follows, we have tried to make an interpretation of the results we gathered from the items of the questionnaire we asked following the same order. Nevertheless, we have also planned to find a link between the items and the interpretation to the consistent hypotheses. In this section, the results of each step undertaken will be given and discussed. However, the data collected by the instrument and through the procedure described above are centered on major points mainly the causes behind Economics and Sciences students' failure while dealing with technical modules taught in French language and the effects of the French language as an instrument of instruction on the technical modules.

Questions 1-2-3-4 of the First Section:

To start with, the first questions of the first section ask the students about their sex, age, region their previous and actual branch of studies.

\*04, 54 % of the requested people are aged of 19 years old. One (01) is a male and two (02) are females.

\* 37, 87% of them are aged of 20 years old. Ten (10) are males and fifteen (15) are females.

\*22, 72 % of the informants are aged of 21 years old. Eight (08) of them are males and seven (07) females.

\*18, 18 % of the respondents are aged of 22 years old. Ten (10) of them are males and two (02) are females.

\* 22, 72 % of the requested students are aged of 23 years old. Two (02) of them are males and three (03) are females.

\*04, 54 % of the informants are aged of 24 years old. Two (02) of them are males and one (01) of them is a female.

\*04, 54 % of the respondents are aged of 25 years old. One (01) is a male and two (02) are females.

Questions 1-2 of the Second Section:

They try to answer for how many years they have been studying French language and whether the "Undergraduate Degree in Economics Sciences" was their first choice or was just a computer orientation and the rest of the questions were put in the second section of the questionnaire. All these information helped the researchers to identify learners' profile. These are analyzed in the fig2 and fig3 below.

Fig2. Duration of studying French language

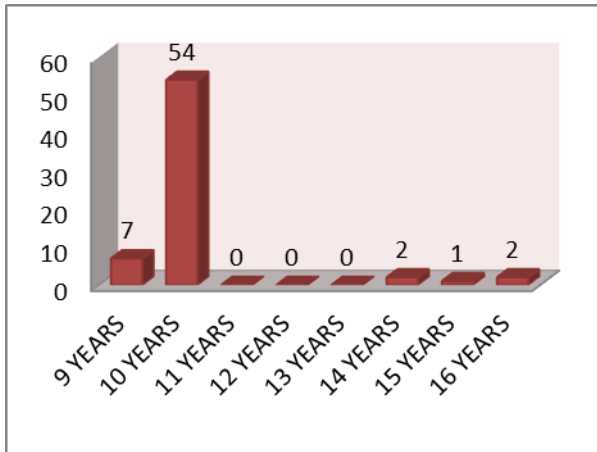
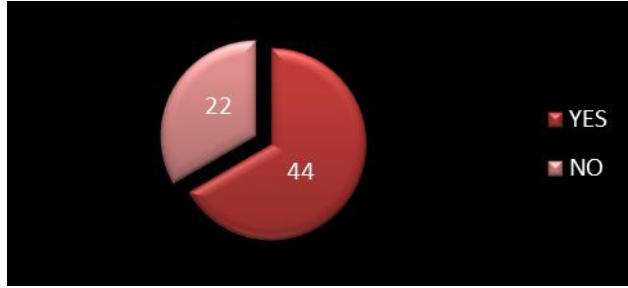


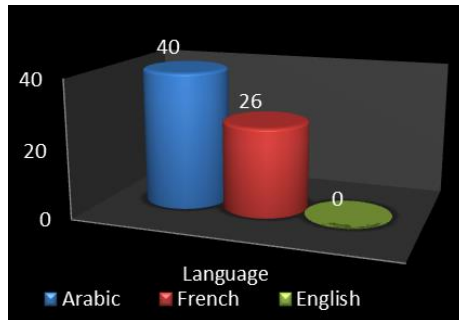
Fig3. Choice of Undergraduate Degree of Economics Sciences



Question 7

The aim of this question was to know about student's attitudes towards the study of the technical modules in Arabic, French or English language. Most of the students respond for studying these technical modules in Arabic. Most of them who are 40 from the 66 respondents prefer studying the technical modules in Arabic representing 60, 60% while the rest of the respondents who are (26) representing 39, 39% are for studying the technical modules in French language. This is illustrated in figure 4.

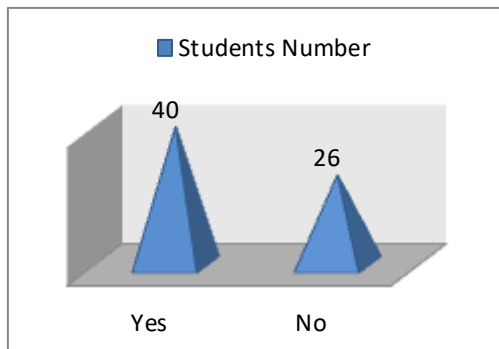
Fig4. Choice of Language while Studying the Technical Modules



Questions 8 and 9

The objective of these questions is to know if students are facing difficulties while studying in French language. 60, 60% of the respondents stated that they are facing difficulties, when they use French language and 39, 39% of the respondents stated that they are not facing difficulties. Figure5 shows the statistics.

Fig5.  
Language



Difficulties with French

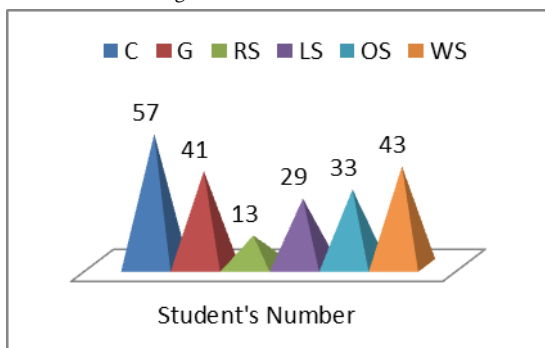
We want to shed light on some kind of difficulties which are confronting the respondents, when studying in French language. Statistically speaking, 86, 36% representing 57 respondents have a problem in comprehension, while 62, 12% of the students, who represent 41 do not master the grammatical rules.

19, 69% of the students who represent 13 respondents have problems of reading 93% of students who represent 29 respondents have problems of listening.

50% of students who represent 33 respondents have problems of speaking.

The final skill, which is writing represents 65, 15%. (43) of students among 66 who are confronting problems of writing.

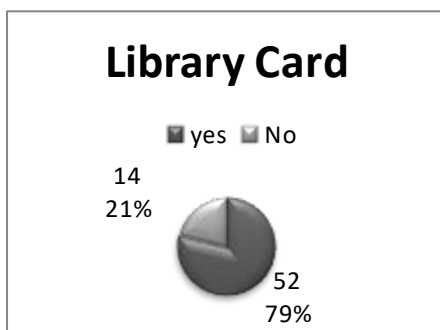
Fig6. Kinds of Difficulties



Question 10

We want to know if the university students have a library card and the statistics show us that 78, 78 % of the respondents have a library card while 21, 21% don't have a library card at all.

Fig7. Students' Possession of the Library Card



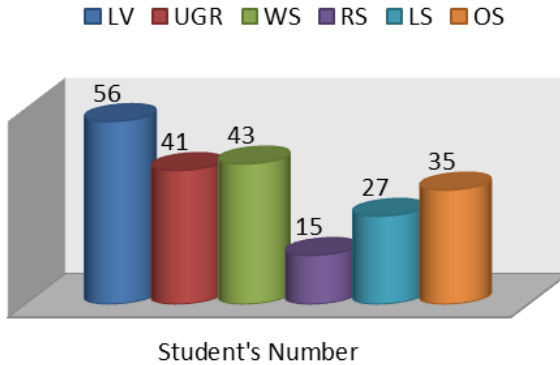
Question 15

The only aim from this question is to be sure that the respondents are really suffering from many problems while studying in French language after asking them practically the same question in the same questionnaire. We obtained nearly the same results, which are as follows:

84.84 % (55) of respondents have a lack of vocabulary in French language. It was mentioned in question 09 of the same questionnaire. Whole of the respondents 62.62 % ( 41) agree in having problems, when dealing with grammar and rules. 22.72 % ( 15) of the respondents have problems of reading in French language.

Concerning the listening skill 40.90 % ( 27) of the respondents agree also that they still have difficulties while studying in French language; 53.03 % ( 35) of the respondents keep having difficulty while dealing with the speaking skill as well as with the writing skill (43) 65.15% of the respondents have difficulties.

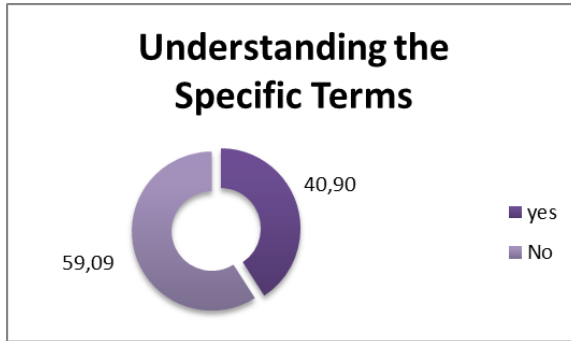
Fig8. Limits in the French Language



Questions 18 and 19

These questions are the most vital ones, whereby it is possible to identify the problems that are facing students when studying the technical modules in French language at university. Statistics show us that more than half of students 59, 09% (39) do not understand the specific terms (Technical terms) while 40, 90% (27) of them do understand.

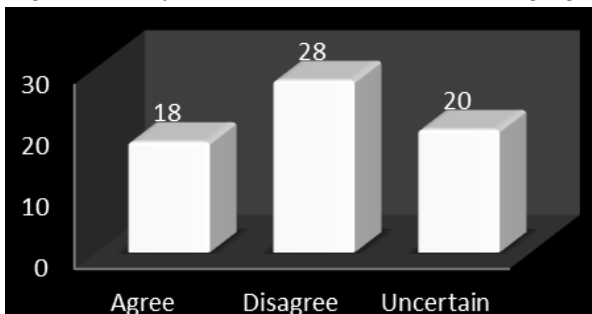
Fig9. Understanding of the Specific Terms



Question 20 - 21 – 22 – 23 and 24

As for the learning in the French language, 27, 27% (18) of them agree with studying the technical modules in French language, while 42, 42% (28) disagree and 30, 30% (20) are not sure about studying the technical modules in French language.

Fig10. The Study of Technical Modules in French Language.



## 5. Recommendations

From our present investigation, it can be noted that we can reach some valuable observations regarding the implementation of the specific terms in technical modules, which are taught in French language at the Department of Economics Sciences and Management at University Djilali Liabes of SidiBel Abbes; the thing that can be measured as a positive point. As it is said by most of the scientists that nothing new starts in a perfect way and research always aims at diagnosing and identifying the problems and finding solutions.

In this section, we have seen that it is beneficial to recommend some adequate solutions to solve the linguistic problems, which face the Economics Sciences students when studying the technical modules in French language. This is the proof that it has not been totally divorced from the scene of teaching settings. These recommendations are assembled in what follows:

Normally, from the first weeks of the students' entrance to university, days of training and information are crucial for the purpose of orienting them in their new learning environment.

When a given technical branch starts to be implemented in the faculty of Management, it would be preferable to study deeply the various needed means so as to facilitate to the students to be enrolled in a professional milieu that is more and more influenced by the globalization effect.

In each teaching session, it is the duty of the teacher to be the head. Over, more explicitly, for every theme, one teacher has to play the role of a guide element of the topics

Providing students with a clear image of a capable student working with the principle of making what is difficult easy, the impossible possible, the implicit explicit and the invisible visible. Among the main suitable sentences which can be used by the technical teacher when thinking aloud in order to create a kind of participation in class are:

- Is it possible to be.....
- It is possible to put it later on.....
- I ask you why.....
- Not far from this context .....
- I focus on this .....

What can be also understood from our investigation is that in specific modules which are taught in French language, continuous assessment is obligatory. So as to make the students ready to tackle with new specific terms. At this stage, it is possible to recommend the inclusion of tests, home works, and attendances to lectures with its different sequences. The student's participation in class has to be taken into account and the final examination marks as the pre-basics of the global evaluation of the student. The teacher is obliged to discuss about this process during sessions.

More reliability is one of the obligations to make students attend their training sessions. If undergraduates choose the teacher, they request having a tutor with preceding explanations of different difficult specific words in the studied modules.

## 6. Conclusion

After analyzing the data provided by students', the researchers come to draw some tentative concluding remarks concerning students' performance in technical classes. Moreover, an interpretation and analysis of the students' responses have been studied and computerized for a statistical analysis of the questionnaire. The outcomes we got during our investigation are authenticated to the three hypotheses and our purposes have been realized. That is, the problem we

have stated was considered as a contribution to identify the difficulties teachers and students confronted at the Economics Sciences and Management Department. This analysis has, in fact, unveiled a poor French language ability among many students due to their insufficient linguistic competence in French language, their limited and ineffective stock of linguistic French language strategies, their lack of writing, reading, listening and speaking in the target language while studying the technical modules.

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