Investigating the Quality of Assessment Methods in ESP Classrooms: Practices and Challenges

استقصاء حول جودة نظام التقييم في مجال تعليم اللغة الانجليزية لأغراض محددة: ممارسات وتحديات

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Abstract:

Assessment is one of the most effective factors that play a decisive role in enhancing the quality of teaching and learning. Accordingly, assessment in English for specific purposes (ESP) is now widely known as an integral part of language assessment. Thus, the present study was designed to investigate the quality of assessment methods within ESP practitioners, and unveil the major challenges they face throughout this process. To this end, a mixed method approach was conducted at the chemistry department, University of Tlemcen (Algeria). Results revealed that ESP teachers depend on traditional methods to a large extent. Besides, they encounter challenges regarding the assessment process as they need to improvise since they lack adequate training. Moreover, students seemed to have some difficulties in assessment tasks as they have insufficient skills to communicate the language in context.

Keywords: Assessment, methods, English for Specific Purposes, Challenges.

مُلَخَّصُ البَحْثِ

يعد التقييم أحد العوامل الفاعلة التي تؤدي دورًا حاسماً في تحسين جودة التدريس والتعلم. وبناءً على ذلك، فعملية التقييم في اللغة الإنجليزية لأغراض محددة (ESP) هي جزء لا يتجزأ من تقييم اللغ، وعلى هذا الأساس تم تصميم هذه الدراسة للاطلاع على أساليب التقييم التي يتبعها أساتذة ESP ، والكشف عن مختلف التحديات التي يواجهوها خلال هذه العملي، ولهذه الغاية، تم اختيار عينة من طلبة قسم الكيمياء وأساتذتهم في مادة اللغة الانجليزية بجامعة تلمسان(الجزائر). حيث كشفت النتائج أنّ أساتذة ESP يعتمدون على أساليب التقييم

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التقليدية إلى حد كبير، كما اتضح أنّهم يواجهون تحديات تتعلق بالتكوين الذاتي ؛ فهم بحاجة إلى البحث وابتكار
طرق تتماشى وخصوصيات المادة التدريسية، نظرا لافتقارهم للتدريب الكافي والمناسب في التخصص ESP. وفي
المقابل يجد الطلاب صعوبات أثناء عملية التقييم نظرا لنقص قدراتهم اللغوية في اللغة الإنجليزية في التخصص.
الكلمات المفتاحية :أساليب، التحديات، التقييم، اللغة الإنجليزية لأغراض خاصة.

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1. Introduction

ESP teaching/learning has become an issue of concern in higher education
due to the wide expansion of science and technology and global
communication. It is noteworthy that ESP learners are those who are
acquainted with a basic knowledge of English, and are learning the language
which covers a set of professional skills that they need to communicate
effectively either for an academic or occupational purpose. ESP courses,
therefore, are concerned with teaching language in context, mainly, important
terminology and concepts as well as technical terms based on students' needs
in a specific discipline. In this concern, effective ESP course is based on a
well- structured syllabus design together with a successful assessment.

Assessment is an integral part of any educational setting. Its value cannot
be underestimated as it allows practitioners to obtain knowledge about
learners' linguistic competence and professional knowledge which reflects
the quality of the teaching/learning process. Richards and Renandiya (2002)
maintain that assessment brings about a judgment about the successfulness of
teaching throughout investigating the effectiveness of actual teaching with
regard to the syllabus in an attempt to refine the chasms in the process. More
precisely, ESP assessment methods are founded in congruence with the
course content and objectives. In effect, ESP instructors, who are generally
English department graduates, are not domain expert as they lack the
necessary training. Hereby, devising tests and evaluation tools is visualized as
a daunting task.

2. Literature Review
2.1. Assessment in ESP

Assessment in education is regarded as the process of gathering data
about the learning environment and making decisions to improve the teaching
and learning experience based on these obtained information (Airasian,
1991). In this respect, teachers conduct assessment procedures to diagnose

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learners' performance, identify their needs, make attempts to facilitate their learning and provide opportunities to raise the quality of their learning.

From a narrower angle, ESP assessment is, more or less, concerned with evaluating language competencies within specific discipline. That is to say, ESP assessment is not of big difference from general language assessment, except that it focuses on the language, skills, discourse of a specific discipline (Dudley Evans & St John1998). Hence, assessing specific English use among identical group of learners having special learning needs, such as doctors, engineers, lawyers and others. Assessment in ESP, therefore, is concerned with language acquaintance parallel to specific purpose content knowledge. In this specific context, Douglas (2000: 8) defines ESP assessment as "tests which attempt to measure language ability for specific vocational, professional and academic purposes".

ESP assessment is of three main types: diagnostic, formative and summative. Diagnostic assessment helps teachers determine learners' actual competencies and knowledge prior launching in teaching process. This encompasses pre-tests, self-assessment, discussion board responses, and interviews. Formative assessment, on the other hand, is a process of getting continuous feedback about the teaching/learning situation during the instructional process. This can be achieved throughout in-class activities, teachers' classroom observation, questions/answers sessions as well as homework. Furthermore, summative assessment, which is the formal evaluation procedure, is performed at the end of a unit of study to confirm that the teaching objectives have been met.

2.2. Role of Assessment in ESP

Teaching, learning and assessment are inextricably interrelated. Dudley-Evan and St. John (1998) believe that assessment plays a pivotal role in ESP wherein, teachers obtain feedback about the quality of their teaching as well as students' learning which may be determined only by conducting assessment procedures. Figure1 displays the connectedness of assessment with the other stages of ESP teaching.
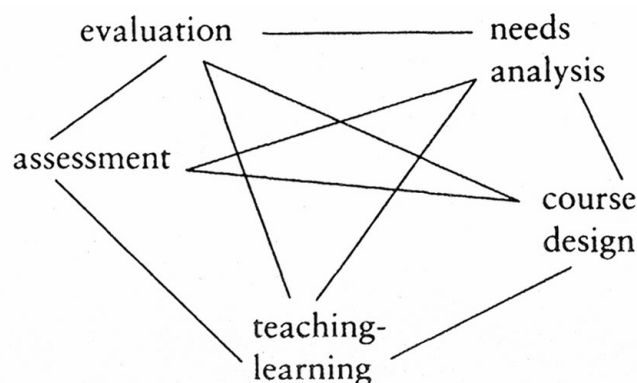
Figure1.1: Stages in the ESP process (Dudley-Evan and st. John, 1998: 121)

Hence, it would be fair to say that assessment in ESP classrooms is deemed to raise learners' opportunities to determine their strengths and weaknesses, enhance their critical thinking as they are faced with a variety of task types, and improve their skills and performance. In this line of thought, Kizlik (2010) refers to "needs assessment" as the "systematic process for determining and addressing needs or gaps between current conditions and desired conditions or wants".

On the other hand, it allows teachers to reckon the effectuality of these procedures. That is to say, effective assessment enables teachers to get genuine feedback about learners and their actual position, which are indispensable for academic decisions. Furthermore, it gives feedback about their own teaching if they are to engage in self-assessment procedures.

It is worth adding that assessment makes a contribution to motivate ESP learners as it serves to evaluate their knowledge and abilities in English; which may influence their attitudes owing to the fact that ESP examination is a "hurdle to be overcome by hook or by crook before learners are allowed to graduate" (Chamberlain & Baumgardner, 1988: 88). Hence, evaluation procedures in general could be used as a key to trigger learners to perform better in an attempt to achieve good grades so as to be able to graduate.

2.3. Methods of Assessment in ESP Classrooms

It is a truism to assert that assessment enhances the progression of teaching, and plays a crucial role in promoting the chances to attain the learning objectives. Hence, providing a rigorous, valid and reliable assessment procedure is likely to raise the quality of instruction. Basically, ESP assessment is related to particular content, theme and topics of a specific

area. Hence, alternative assessment methods have come into play to substitute traditional assessment. In fact, alternative assessments are being implemented as an attempt to accentuate the role of learner-oriented assessment; further, it has shifted the focus towards a holistic assessment which is likely to deliver in-depth feedback about learner performance.

In traditional assessment, students are, mostly, exposed to a sort of questions with a given set of responses from which students choose an answer such as, true/false quiz or multiple-choice tests as well as fill-in-the-blank-activities. Hence, students tend to opt for one particular answer which is the most appropriate to the given question (Stoica, 2006). However, alternative assessment, that includes peer and self-assessment, teacher observation as well as portfolios, involves any type of testing where students produce answers to the questions from their own ideas using their own words, such as short answers and paragraph or essay writing. Seemingly, these kinds of testing serve to "ask students to show what they can do" (Coombe et al., 2007: 24). That is to say, students are required to expose their abilities and foster their creativity and critical thinking when producing answers, as they are having opportunities to reconsider their understanding, build prior knowledge, integrate ideas, explain and communicate their knowledge as well (Roscoe & Chi, 2007).

Thereupon, it goes without saying that the most appropriate assessment methods of ESP, as it concerns special need and vocabulary, are: objective tests, short answer, essay writing, oral assessment and teachers' observation. Objective tests are test types in which the marking of the answer is objective (Stoica, 2006). This category encompasses short-answer questions and multiple-choice tests. Undoubtedly, thes test formats are known by its practicality, high reliability and rapidity of scoring, the economy of time and the ability to test large content areas. Short-answer questions, on the other hand, provide learners the chance to generate answers instead of choosing from a limited set of suggestions. Besides, the most appropriate way to check out students' language abilities and the extent to which they are qualified is to produce a composition that transmits their ideas and knowledge; yet, essay writing is considered as time-consuming activity which is deficient in the communicative needs that ESP learners require. Another method is oral assessment; this type involves all tasks that trigger students to expose their oral or communicative skills with regard to their subject area such as, role plays, oral reports, retelling stories, interviews …etc. At last, teacher's observation in classrooms is also visualized as effective methods to assess learners' skills and performance.

2.4.   Issues Related to ESP Assessment Quality

It is a truism to assert that the major obstacle that ESP practitioners encounter when producing course design or assessment activities is the lack of knowledge about the specialized subject. Consequently, they generally seek help from expert informants or make personal researches to find out solutions. Otherwise, they opt for context-based research by analyzing language use in a specific subject area.

It should be noted, however, that there are four quality-aligned criteria that should be considered so as to assure the effectiveness and good quality of the assessment procedure. Accordingly, classroom assessment needs to contain at least validity and reliability, which are vital in measuring the quality of information obtained in the classroom (Genesee & Upsher, 1996), and fairness which is of paramount importance in the preparation of the assessment.

- **Validity**

An assessment process is said to be valid when it is successful in measuring what it is supposed to measure (Maree, 2010). To put it simple, validity implies the extent to which the obtained information throughout the assessment allows the teacher to get clear and authentic facts about the learning situation that he/she wishes to investigate. This criterion entails four aspects of validity. First, content validity refers to the extent to which the objectives of assessment correspond with the instructional objectives. Second, consequential validity refers to the way in which assessment is of value to the teaching and learning process and to the students *per see* (O'Malley & Piers, 1996). Third, ipsative validity (Hamidi, 2010); in this type learners' assess themselves by comparing their actual performance with their previous level (Gipps, 1994). This type is also called "learner referenced validity" which is considered by Lambert and Lines (2000) of significant role as it serves to identify the learners' progress, and offers diagnostic information about them in the assessment procedure.

- **Reliability**

Reliability is assessment constructing that denotes the extent to which the assessment brings about consistent results. As a matter of fact, assessment is said to be reliable if there is a similarity in scores or judges' ratings when it is done in different occasions with different learners' and instructors (Brindley, 2003). In this respect, Harmer (2001: 322) posits *"in practice, reliability, is enhanced by making the test instructors absolutely clear, restricting the scope for variety in the answers, and making sure that test conditions remain constant"*. Some scholars call this type *dependability*

claiming that assessment is dependable when it involves disclosure and fidelity. The former implies the extent to which the student gets a question right or wrong depending on the nature of the question, whilst the latter denotes the way the evidence is or is not recorded (Lambert & Lines, 2000: 11). The factors that influence assessment quality with regard to reliability according to Brown (2004) are: the diversity of scoring by assessors, the instruments of data collection, and the variation in the learner. Accordingly, Brindley (2003) assumes that providing a good training and expertise for instructors would yield to improve their abilities to obtain the desired information. Furthermore, accounting for a variety of assessment methods would lead to avoid bias and inaccuracy of using one method, in addition to the use of formative assessment (Hamidi, 2010).

- **Fairness**

Fairness is regarded as the most controversial category in large-scale assessment (Kunnan, 2005). Practically, fairness implies dealing with learners as if they all have the same abilities, and providing them with a similar opportunity to expose their competencies (Lynch, 2001). He added that "fairness will need to address the consequences of assessment; that is, we need to examine the uses to which our assessment procedures are being put and the intended as well as unintended effects on the individual being assessed" (Lynch, 2001: 232). Hence, students should be given fair opportunities when taking part in the assessment, so that they all have equal chances to demonstrate their knowlege (Messik, 1994). On his part, Brown (2005) assumes that fairness apply to teacher's objectivity and lack of bias or any personal feelings towards students when assessing or scoring.

3. Methodology

3.1. Design

The present study was descriptive in nature. It was designed to investigate the quality of assessment methods used by ESP practitioners as well as the challenges they face when assessing language ability in context. Accordingly, the sample population of the study encompasses ESP teachers and students at the University of Tlemcen (Algeria). Participants were 6 ESP teachers at the Chemistry department, whose age ranged between 26 to 35 years old, in addition to 54 randomly selected students of different levels enrolled at the same department. It is a truism to assert that the present sample cannot be representative to all ESP contexts. Yet, results might be viable in similar settings. The objectives of the research were:

1. To investigate the assessment methods used by teachers in ESP contexts.

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2. To determine the challenges faced by ESP teachers in ESP classes.
3. To examine the extent to which these methods are effective from learners' perspectives.

3.2. Instruments

In-depth structured interview was conducted with ESP teachers in an attempt to obtain information about the quality of their assessment methods and practices. Besides, classroom observations and document review were employed to draw authentic feedback about teachers' assessment methods, and whether the latters are effective and congruent with learners' needs. To check the matter from both sides, questionnaires were carried out with students to depict their perceptions about teachers.

4. Results and Discussion

What is, probably, prevalent about assessment and testing in language for specific purposes is that it is similar to that of general language assessment. However, Douglas (2000) claims that ESP assessment covers special assessment methods and techniques with regard to the specific-subject area in concern. Considering this research, results demonstrated variations in the methods teachers use in assessment. They also reflect a comprehensive image of the impediments and facilities they face in the ESP teaching setting.

4.1. ESP Teachers' Challenges

The major issue that was uncovered throughout the present research is that ESP teaching situation undergoes considerable issues concerned with the assessment methods beside some teaching practices which are, mainly, the consequences of a lack of teacher preparation and training programmes. This refers to the fact that ESP teachers are, mostly, graduates of general English departments, which implies that they are prepared to teach general English. Yet, when launching in ESP teaching they are confronted with the challenge of teaching English language in accordance with the field specific content (chemistry). Moreover, the majority of them were part-time teachers holding Master degree in English language, who had not attended any training, except for the only one full-time teacher who received pre-service and in-service training for one year. The following table illustrates ESP teachers' profile:

Initials	Gender	Qualification	Training	Status	Experience
SK	Female	Doctorate	Yes	Full-time	5 years
BA	Female	Master	No	Part-time	3 years
SG	Male	Master	No	Part-time	1 year
CW	Female	Master	No	Part-time	2 years
TH	Female	Master	No	Part-time	2 years
SS	Female	Master	No	Part-time	1 year

Table1: ESP teachers' profile

Furthermore, in order to be able to manage ESP assessment, teachers' need to take into account the use of language in context. This implies being familiar with specific vocabulary, etymology, scientific concepts as well as developing an understanding about matters related to the field so as to be able to teach and assess the language through knowledge. Furthermore, introducing both language ability and knowledge of the subject matter are considered requisite elements in the formulation of test tasks, as this may trigger students to live the target language use situation. This is confirmed by Bachman (1990:112) who asserts that *"one would expect that the closer the correspondence between the characteristics of the test method and the essential features of the language use context, the more "authentic" the test task will be for test takers".* In order to achieve this, creativity must be present.

What was noticed throughout this investigation is that the staff at the chemistry department are working diligently to improve the teaching situation in general, ESP context is no exception. As a case in point, they have provided "Google Drive" system to facilitate the process of formative assessment for teachers. That is to say, they are required to establish at least one test per month in addition to the continuous evaluation of students' participation and integration in classroom tasks. This initiative has been carried out to improve the ESP quality of teaching and foster students' learning. Interestingly, class size was another helping factor for teachers to manage successfully their classes as the maximum number of students did not exceed 26 students. Undoubtedly, this is potential to facilitate the teaching process as a whole as well as classroom activities including assessment and testing. Therefore, it is most likely that ESP teachers are exposed to better conditions which help them build positive attitudes and improve the situation; hence, they would be able to better control the assessment procedures.

4.2. Classroom Assessment Methods

Based on the analysis of data, it was revealed that teachers tend to use a variety of assessment methods and technique. They, most of the time, provide tasks that are related to the specific purpose language content. Thus, most of teachers who are in charge of first and second year levels use traditional assessment methods such as, fill-in-the-blank tasks, multiple choice activities, and true/false statements. These latter were adopted in both formative and summative assessment. As for third year and master students, they are assessed based on paragraph or essay writing, in addition to oral

presentations with the aim to evaluate their oral abilities. The following figure illustrates the findings.
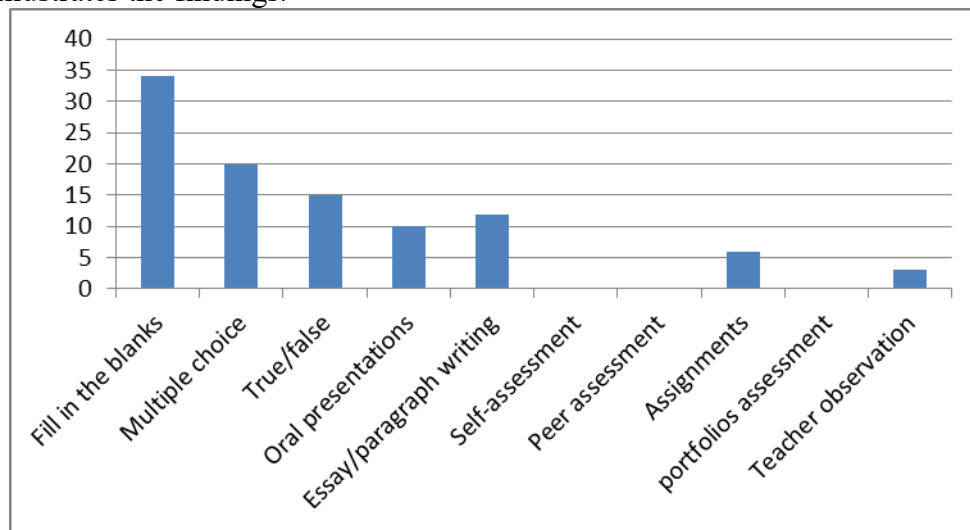

Figure 2: The major assessment methods used by ESP teachers.

Admittedly, alternative assessment models such as self/peer assessment, portfolios and observation are said to enhance learner-autonomy. In effect, ESP students showed a tendency towards collaborative tasks in general, and peer assessment in particular, as this method is believed to be a factor that triggers their motivation and help them improve their language skills and content knowledge as claimed by Syzenko (2018). Unfortunately, this kind of assessment was completely ignored by teachers seeing that they depend solely on traditional methods as the previous bar-graph demonstrates. This may be due to the insufficiency of teachers' qualifications in terms of professionalism and creativity. Moreover, it was noticed that there was a lack, if not a complete absence, of technology integration; teachers barely use computers, data shows or any other ICT tools.

Owing to the fact that there was no unified syllabus, teachers of each level meet to discuss students' needs and set the content of the course. Experienced teachers were successful to establish adequate courses taking into account the main objective of ESP which is teaching English language ability through the specific content knowledge. Nevertheless, novice teachers steered towards concentrating solely on general English grammar and vocabulary. In this specific context it is worth noting that training and formal preparation were important factors that would remedy their deficiencies and help them ameliorate their performance.

From their part, students expressed varied opinions towards the assessment used by their teachers. As shown in the following bar-graphs, they believed that fill in the blanks, multiple choice and true/false activities are beneficial to them claiming that they help them enrich their vocabulary mainly, their scientific repertoire. Furthermore, they find these activities easy and convenient as they are already accustomed with this kind of tasks in the classroom.
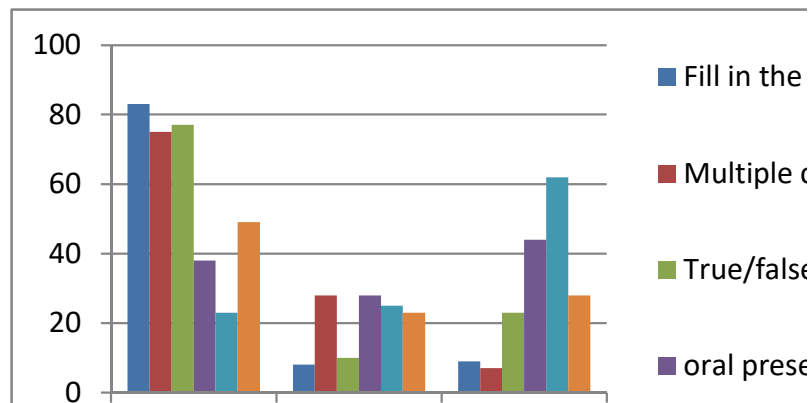

Figure3: students' perception about the effectiveness of assessment methods.

Paradoxically, writing activities and oral presentations seem to be the most difficult tasks. 63% of participants perceived writing tasks, particularly essays, difficult and ineffective, considering that their grammar and vocabulary are insufficient to write whole essays. Likewise, they didn't advocate oral presentations as they lack the speaking skills; noting that this skill is not given much care by teachers in ESP classes.

5. Conclusion

In overall terms, results of this study revealed that there is a variation in the assessment methods followed in ESP contexts with regard to the objective of obtaining feedback about learner' specific purpose language ability. It is firmly acknowledged that good training is deemed to create well prepared instructors. Nevertheless, English teachers seem to be lacking the adequate preparation prior to launching into the profession of subject specific language teaching (ESP). This yield serious impact on the teaching and learning process, not least assessment procedures. Accordingly, the adopted assessment methods have significant role in determining learners' competencies, strengths and weaknesses. In this respect, the incorporation of adequate assessment, being creative by implementing alternative methods and technology to ESP contexts would lead to better results.

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