



Breaking Barriers: Challenges of Integrating Content and Language in Algerian Higher education

Tihal Wafia

ENSB, (Algeria)

HYPERLINK tihal.wafia@ensb.dz"

Abstract

In ESP classes, teachers are required to integrate language teaching with subject-specific content, which often present a number of challenges. The aim of this research paper is to uncover the main obstacles Algerian teachers encounter in integrating content and language in ESP instruction and to suggest potential solutions to address these issues. A qualitative method is adopted to investigate these integration challenges. The paper reveals that the successful integration of content and language is a holistic approach and calls for the adoption of the learning-oriented assessment (LOA) framework as a promising solution. It also encourages a thorough reconsideration of the role of ESP in Algerian higher education institutions.

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1. Introduction

In our modern and connected world, it is important to have the language skills necessary to communicate effectively within our chosen field of work or study. Effective communication is no longer limited to just spoken or written language; it also includes the ability to understand and use the specialized language of our respective fields of work or study. That is where English for Specific Purposes (ESP) comes into play: a specialized type of English language teaching that focuses on teaching English for specific professional or academic purposes. It is generally related to intentional use of specific vocabulary that are appropriate and relevant to a particular field with a special focus on building and developing particular knowledge, skills, and abilities. ESP is about equipping learners with the necessary language skills to effectively carry out tasks related to their specific fields of study or work, both in the present and potentially in the future (Anthony, 2018). In Algeria, the importance of integrating content and language in higher education has been recognized, and many universities have started to implement language programs so as to help improving students' language proficiency levels. However, this integration is not a simple task, and it presents a range of challenges for both students and instructors. This paper aims to explore the complexities and challenges of integrating content and language in Algerian higher education, while also proposing potential solutions to tackle these issues. The paper addresses two primary research questions: (1) What are the key challenges that emerge during the integration of content and language in Algerian higher education? and (2) What are the potential solutions to effectively address these

challenges, benefiting both students and instructors?

- **Review of Literature**
- **ESP in Algerian Higher Education**

English for Specific Purposes (ESP) is an important aspect of language training, particularly in academic and professional settings. Algerian Higher Education has recognized the importance of ESP courses in improving educational quality. Because of the increased demand for English competence in diverse professions such as business, engineering, medical, and law, there is a growing emphasis on specialized language training.

In the Algerian context, there has been a preference for French over English in various educational, professional, and administrative aspects. However, in the ever-growing globalized world, English is occupying a significant space “because of the linguistic requirements of the new world” (Assassi, 2020, p.440).

Algeria is progressively adopting English as its main foreign language, responding to the increasing demand for English courses among Algerian students and professionals from various fields. Higher education institutions in Algeria now recognize the potential of ESP courses to improve teaching quality, offering specialized language training to meet the growing demand for English proficiency among diverse professionals. The studies of Bouabdallah & Bouyacoub (2017) and Assassi (2020) support this trend, as evidenced by numerous universities now providing ESP programs.

While the English department's primary focus is language instruction, other

departments also acknowledge its significance and include it as a vital supplementary module. This approach ensures that students from different fields gain a foundational understanding of English that complements their expertise. By doing so, students not only acquire general English language skills but also gain proficiency relevant to their chosen fields of study (Boudersa, 2018). By embracing English as a valuable tool for academic and professional development, Algerian higher education recognizes its status as a universal language, preparing students to excel in their domains and promoting cross-disciplinary communication and collaboration.

Last year, Algeria took a crucial step by making English a compulsory subject in primary schools. In a news conference held on July 30, 2022, the Algerian president, Abdelmadjid Tebboune, passionately emphasized the importance of English as the language of research and science, asserting that it should be taught and given greater attention (Ennahar TV, 2022). He contrasted it with French, which he referred to as a 'spoil of war'. This move holds the promise that the issue of English language proficiency (ESP) may gradually lessen in the coming years. By introducing English education at an early age, the new generation will be better equipped with language skills, potentially leading to an improvement in ESP among students as they progress through the education system. This foresight in language instruction suggests that in the future, the younger population will be more proficient in English than the current situation, paving the way for greater opportunities, better communication on a global scale, and increased international collaboration.

2.2. The Algerian ESP Project

The Algerian ESP project was the result of extensive communication between the Ministry of Higher Education and several esteemed British universities, including the University of Manchester, Glasgow, Leeds, Sheffield, Nottingham, and Salford during the 1980s. The project aimed to foster academic collaboration and enhance English language instruction within Algerian universities, promoting educational excellence and international partnerships. (Benyelles, 2009; Bouabdallah & Bouyacoub, 2017)). These universities willingly entered into individual agreements with the Algerian Ministry of Higher Education. Under these agreements, a select number of Algerian students were given the opportunity to pursue full-time postgraduate studies at these British universities. In return, the British universities committed to fostering cooperation between Algeria and Britain, particularly in the fields of science and technology, at the magister and doctoral levels. Each British university was paired with a specific Algerian higher education institution (Bouabdellah, 2017):

- The University of Blida partnered with Salford University to focus on 'Mechanical Engineering.'
- The University of Constantine collaborated with Glasgow University to address computing purposes.
- The University of Oran joined forces with Nottingham University to cater to electronic needs.
- INELEC (National Institute of Electricity and Electronics) and the University of Sheffield worked together

to cover electricity, electronics, and electro-techniques.

It is to be noted that “the British council at that time supplied the Algerian institutions with the necessary pedagogical equipments in order to enable the centers to perform their tasks adequately” (Bouabdellah & Bouyacoub, 2017, P. 219).

The fundamental goal of establishing collaborations between Algerian and British universities was to create a collaborative and rich environment that would foster academic success. This was accomplished by establishing agreements for cooperative postgraduate courses, which facilitated information sharing and advanced research activities. These collaborations aimed to ensure that students may benefit from the experience of both Algerian and British researchers. Accordingly, three ESP centers were established across Algeria and started operating in February 1988: the first in Oran, the second in Algiers, and the third in Constantine. (Bouabdellah & Bouyacoub, 2017). Notably, in 2021, the Algerian Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research launched the Professional Development Program on Teaching Integrated Content and Language in Higher Education to strengthen English language instruction in Algerian universities and ENSs (Ecoles Normales Supérieures). This collaborative initiative involved the Algerian government, the United States Department of State, Columbia University, and Teachers College, aiming to address the complexities of language integration within the Algerian context. With roots in extensive discussions about teaching practices after the LMD Reform in 2004 and building on earlier efforts, the program is actively progressing, currently in its third cohort.

• *Method*

A qualitative approach is adopted to explore the challenges Algerian ESP teachers encounter while integrating content and language in their instruction. The research involved observing eight teachers and conducting interviews with twenty- three teachers from different universities to gain a comprehensive understanding of these obstacles. The reason for having fewer observed teachers was that the focus was on schools and universities in close proximity. In contrast, the interviewed teachers were selected from various regions across the country allowing us to gather a wide range of perspectives and experiences, enriching our study with varied viewpoints, and gaining deeper insights. Drawing upon extensive experience as an ESP teacher, the researcher incorporates personal expertise and ongoing self-reflection to enable a profound grasp of the issues confronted by Algerian ESP teachers. The goal of employing this qualitative method is to identify and outline the most frustrating barriers faced by these teachers in their efforts to effectively integrate content and language.

3. Findings and Analysis

• *Challenges Faced by ESP Teachers*

The main obstacles that require urgent attention are presented and discussed as follows:

2.1.1. *Lack of Needs Analysis*

The absence of needs analysis in ESP instruction is a serious issue and a cause for concern. This makes it difficult for educators to accurately identify the language needs of their students and might result in a mismatch between the

content being taught and the learning objectives of the students.

A plethora of needs analysis studies are reported in Algerian ESP literature, highlighting the importance of conducting needs analysis in EFL context, particularly with ESP students. (Dakhmouche, 2008; Ghedeir, 2017; Ounis, 2018)). Before beginning any course, it is imperative and vital to conduct a needs analysis. It is a method for determining the knowledge, skills, or performance gaps between the present state and the desired state of the foreign language learner. Basically, needs analysis entails determining the fundamental requirements of a person or a group of learners and then ranking them in terms of importance (Richards and Platt, 1992). In 1987, Hutchinson and Waters categorized needs into *target needs* and *learning needs*: the former refers to “what the learner needs to do in a target situation” while the latter is more related to “what the learner needs to do in order to learn” (p.54). Thus, making of both needs a fundamental aspect and a complex process in the learning situation. ESP teachers are not only interested in analyzing their students’ target situation needs (What people do with language), but also in understanding language learning (How people learn to do what they do with language). In other words, a learning-centred approach to needs analysis is always needed (Hutchinson & Waters, 1987). Accordingly, the deficiency that lies in the absence of a thorough analysis of the specific language requirements in the context of English for Specific Purposes education is a weakness that affects the majority of Algerian higher education institutions. Algerian ESP instructors constantly run the risk of failing to comprehend their students’ specific

learning needs and goals. These flaws have a multitude of detrimental effects, which are summarized as follows:

- Inadequate instruction resulting in students' lack of knowledge or progress.

- Students who are frustrated, uninspired, and disengaged

- Both professors and students waste time and energy in an inefficient manner (E.g. The choice of activities that are irrelevant or ineffective for students).

- Decreased student chances for an educational quality

The ESP teacher needs to collect information regarding the requirements and objectives that the students must achieve all along the academic year. The culmination of the teaching project is to showcase how the learners will be able to apply what they have learnt in authentic, real life situations (Robinson, 1989).

Overall, "needs analysis is critical to effective ESP instruction, as it provides insight into students' language proficiency levels and subject matter expertise." (Basturkmen, 2010, p. 38). Without doubt, a thorough needs analysis is a crucial aspect of successful teaching and learning and by conducting it, teachers can tailor their instructional strategies to meet the particular needs and goals of their students. Needless to say that conducting needs analysis leads to more effective and engaging instruction, higher levels of student motivation and achievement, and more efficient use of resources.

4.1.2. Absence of Collaboration

Collaboration is seen as the ability to discuss, analyze and exchange perspectives which assumes that teamwork is crucial. It is defined as “the activity of working together towards a common goal” (Hesse et al. (2015: 38). Nevertheless, Algerian language teachers encounter real challenges when it comes to teach English for specific purposes, represented in the dual responsibility of teaching the language and at the same time concentrating on the content.

Due to a lack of cooperation between language teachers and content teachers, many Algerian ESP educators struggle when trying to use English as a language of instruction. In fact, it can be difficult to strike the correct balance between language education and subject-matter knowledge. The main issue with English for specific purposes is that students are instructed by either a content teacher or a language teacher, which results in a deficiency in one of the two areas. Content teachers focus on teaching their specific subject matter but lack the specialized knowledge in teaching English as a language, while language teachers focus on teaching English language skills and lack the required knowledge of the content and the technical vocabulary of a particular field to teach it effectively. This ultimately results in students either being unable to fully comprehend the content being taught or to effectively communicate in their respective field. Teachers of languages require the support, advice, and direction of content experts, and vice versa. It should go without saying that collaboration and teamwork among educators are essential to give students the best education possible (Boudersa, 2018; Ghezali, 2021).

4.1.3. Lack of Teacher Training Program

In Algerian higher institutions, teacher training at tertiary level is totally neglected and the bulk of ESP teachers are language teachers who have not obtained proper training in ESP methodology or language teaching pedagogy. In other words, ESP teachers face another teaching roadblock, which is the lack of the appropriate methodology. It is agreed that "ESP teachers must have the necessary skills and expertise to integrate content and language effectively, and this requires adequate training" (Flowerdew & Miller, 2005, p. 48). However, Most of the time, they are novice teachers with no prior teaching experience. As a result, many educators lack the necessary skills, competencies, disciplinary knowledge and expertise required to successfully blend content and language in their instruction. One more obstacle among many that teachers face and must overcome.

4.1.4. Lack of Suitable Textbook

Another significant challenge in teaching ESP is the absence of textbooks. Unlike general English classes, ESP classes lack specialized materials to cater to students' needs. That is why, in Algerian higher education, "ESP courses are assigned randomly to undergraduate students of English and without any fixed syllabi" (Assassi, 2020, p. 441).

Textbooks are the first source teachers can resort to when they have no time to elaborate in-house materials (Esteban, 2002). Without a textbook, it can be difficult to provide a structured and organized course that covers all of the necessary subject matter, and most "teachers do not have the expertise to

produce teaching materials" (Esteban, 2002, p. 41).

Within this challenge, there is the problem of time constraints. Teachers often complain that they have to spend additional time creating their own materials, searching for relevant articles, and developing their own exercises and activities. This is time-consuming and may result in a less cohesive curriculum.

4.1.5. Assessment

Algerian ESP teachers regard assessment as another roadblock to the integration of content and language teaching in higher education. Abbassi & Djebbari (2021) state that "the major obstacle that ESP practitioners encounter when producing course design or assessment activities is the lack of knowledge about the specialized subject" (p. 1211). This goes in line with Septiana (2018, p. 29) who confirms that "most ESP teachers do not know how to make the right assessing for their ESP students."

The integration of content and language in higher education requires careful consideration of how to simultaneously assess students' language proficiency and content knowledge. In technical and specialized fields where concepts are complex and specific terminology is needed, assessment is regarded as a laborious task. Content teachers believe that assessments could be biased towards students with stronger language skills, disadvantaging those with weaker language skills. Additionally, ESP teachers argue that assessment in Algerian higher education is problematic for them when it comes to integrating content and language in their teaching. The need to assess both language and subject-specific knowledge

creates a dilemma for most educators. This is further complicated by the lack of standardized language proficiency tests in most Algerian universities, which, according to them, leads to discrepancies in grading and evaluation. It is worth noting that a standardized test is not designed by teachers but rather prepared by people who do not belong to the classroom environment, and this suggests that learners' scores are highly reliable and free from subjectivity (Meriem & Bouyakoub, 2020).

ESP teachers advocate that assessments that only focus on measuring content proficiency may overlook language deficiencies, while those that prioritize language proficiency may ignore gaps in understanding the content.

• *Discussions and Proposed Solutions to Overcome the Identified Challenges*

After presenting the most significant barriers encountered in ESP teaching, an in-depth examination and discussion of proposed solutions is offered in the following section:

5.1. *Incorporating an In-depth Needs Analysis Process into the Teaching Methodology*

Regarding the first challenge of the lack of needs analysis in the context of Algerian teachers, it is crucial for educators to carry out careful needs analyses in order to solve this issue and meet the linguistic demands of learners in ESP teaching: This involves pinpointing the specific language functions, vocabulary, and grammatical structures that are necessary for the students to succeed in their chosen fields of study or work. The purpose of conducting a students' need analysis is

mainly “to discover **who** the learners are, **what** they **already know**, and **what they want** from the course” (Izidi & Zitouni, 2017, p.18.).

Through this process of needs analysis, ESP educators can gain a better understanding of their students' language needs and adjust their teaching accordingly. It should be noted that including an in-depth needs analysis process into the teaching methodology is necessary to effective ESP instruction (Long, 2005). Additionally, teachers can conduct their needs analysis naturally and informally through asking their students about their preferences, what they would like to do in class and also through observation during lessons (Fialova, 2021). This can help to identify areas where language support may be needed, and by doing so, teachers can teach learners pre-determined lessons that are closely aligned with the learning objectives of their students, and ensure that the language skills learned in class are specifically relevant to their chosen professions or academic disciplines. It is noteworthy that the main component of ESP course design is that the syllabus is based on an analysis of the needs of the students. Therefore, in ESP, “language is learnt not for its own sake or for the sake of gaining a general education but to smooth the path to entry or greater linguistic efficiency in these environments.” Basturkmen (2006: 18).

In essence, conducting a comprehensive needs analysis is a vital step that empowers teachers with essential tools to design a focused and relevant syllabus, enabling students to acquire language skills directly relevant to their field of study or professional ambitions.

5.2. *Balancing Language Instruction with Subject Matter Expertise through Cooperation*

Concerning the second barrier of the lack of cooperation, it is challenging to make a balance between content and language in the Algerian teaching context. ESP educators need to be skilled at teaching languages and at the same time well-comprehend the academic or professional fields of their students as offering effective language instruction tailored to specific fields requires both language teaching expertise and a thorough understanding of the subject matter. Because of this, ESP language teachers who lack subject-specific knowledge can overcome this teaching obstacle by working cooperatively and collaboratively with subject matter specialists. This is confirmed by Stoller (2002, p. 18) who advocates that "collaboration between ESP teachers and subject matter experts is essential for successful content and language integration". Undoubtedly, collaborative work will result in a personalized method of instruction that is created to match the individual requirements of ESP students. As a matter of fact, and in order to identify the precise language knowledge and abilities needed for a certain profession, create relevant materials and exercises, and provide feedback on learners' language use in a practical context, Algerian language instructors are recommended to collaborate with content teachers. By working together, students will acquire the core tools they need to excel in their particular fields. Needless to say that "effective collaboration between ESP teachers and subject matter experts involves balancing language instruction with subject matter expertise" (Hutchinson & Waters, 1987, p. 64). Basically, this collaboration

culminates in an exciting educational experience that gives learners the confidence to effectively communicate their ideas and thoughts, both vocally and in writing. This is meant to empower learners to succeed academically and professionally and realize their full potential.

In a nutshell, and to close the gap and guarantee that students receive a thorough education that covers both language skills and subject matter competence, collaboration and training between content teachers and language instructors are crucial in ESP educational context.

5.3. *Providing Training and Professional Development Opportunities*

To address the third obstacle relating to the lack of training for Algerian ESP teachers, specialized training programs ought to be developed to equip them with the necessary skills, competencies, and expertise required for teaching in their specific fields. It is crucial to recognize that teaching is an inherently human capability. As such, careful consideration must be given not only to the pedagogical methods employed but also to the selection and training processes for prospective teachers (Ziani, 2016). This highlights the paramount importance of professional development as an urgent requirement for teachers in general, and ESP educators in particular. Benabdi (2022, p. 452) defines professional development as being:

A set of steps to follow in order to
guarantee professional success.
These

steps imply knowing who we are, our
competencies and what we want to
do. It includes mastering new skills
such as having a future vision,
knowing what we need to master,
assessment and designing an
individual development plan.

It is vitally important for Algerian higher education institutions to offer teachers professional development opportunities in order to equip them with the necessary skills and competencies that help them effectively integrate content and language in their teaching. These opportunities, which can come in the form of workshops, seminars, and online courses, should be adjusted to meet the specific needs and interests of individual teachers. It is also important to know that "Providing professional development opportunities is critical to ensuring that ESP teachers have the necessary skills and expertise to deliver effective content and language instruction." (Hyland, 2006, p. 92). By investing in the ongoing high-quality professional development of their teaching staff, higher education institutions can improve the quality of education that is imparted to students as well as help to foster a culture of constantly seeking out new learning opportunities. Without a doubt, professional development programs and training are essential for teachers to advance their knowledge and skills in a variety of areas related to their roles and responsibilities, including instruction,

course design, materials development, cooperation, research, and evaluation. Engaging in such programs can also assist teachers in staying up to date on the most recent advancements in their profession, which will benefit their students afterwards.

In conclusion, it is crucial for Algerian subject matter specialists and language teaching experts to join forces in designing and delivering specialized training programs for ESP teachers. Undoubtedly, incorporating practical experiences, such as observation and collaboration with subject matter specialists, will greatly enhance ESP teachers' understanding of the subject matter and technical vocabulary within their respective fields. Furthermore, technology can play a valuable role by providing continuous support to ESP teachers through online resources like webinars, forums, and video tutorials. These tools can effectively assist teachers in their professional development and enhance their instructional practices.

5.4. Equipping Teachers with a Suitable ESP Textbooks

To tackle the fourth issue of the lack of suitable textbooks in the Algerian ESP context, it is imperative to adopt a team approach that involves a diverse range of professionals working together to design effective and engaging ESP textbooks that meet the needs of both teachers and students. These professionals may include subject matter experts to provide the necessary knowledge and terminology, experienced ESP teachers who can offer insights into the specific language needs of students, instructional designers who ensure that the materials are pedagogically sound, and materials

developers to bring their expertise in design and publishing.

The importance of textbooks in teaching ESP students has been the focus of numerous Algerian research (Boudersa, 2018; Afia, 2020; Assassi, 2021; Benabdi, 2022). All these studies revolved around the significance of textbooks in teaching ESP students, aiming to meet their specific needs and requirements. These studies highlight the crucial role that well-designed and adjusted textbooks play in enhancing the learning experience and ensuring the success of ESP education in Algeria.

When designing a textbook, it is essential to consider various syllabus components, including the grammar syllabus, the lexical syllabus, the situational syllabus, the topic-based syllabus, the task-based syllabus and the multi-syllabus (Harmer 2001). As a result, by fostering teamwork and taking into consideration these important syllabus components, ESP textbooks can be successfully designed to strengthen language learning while at the same time facilitating meaningful subject learning.

5.5. Adopting the Learning Oriented Assessment Framework (LOA)

Regarding the challenge of assessment, which is the last obstacle in the list of barriers mentioned earlier, it is crucial to opt for a framework that aligns with the objectives of integrating content and language in Algerian higher education especially that traditional assessment methods are not always effective in measuring students' language and content knowledge simultaneously. One such framework is the Learning-Oriented Assessment (LOA). LOA can help to address this issue by emphasizing the importance of formative assessment and

providing opportunities for students to demonstrate their knowledge and skills in ways that are relevant and meaningful to them. It is an approach to assessment that places more emphasis on linguistic requirements rather than solely assessing content knowledge. The framework aims to ensure that language proficiency is not a barrier to demonstrating content knowledge (Purpura, 2014).

To apply the LOA framework in ESP context, teachers should start by identifying the language demands of the task and aligning them with the content objectives of the assessment because "when assessment tasks embody the desired learning outcomes, students are primed for deep learning experiences by progressing towards these outcomes" (Carless, 2007, p. 59). This can be achieved by using rubrics and criteria that clearly define the language and content objectives of the assessment. It should be highlighted that in LOA, EFL learners are neither evaluated in comparison to one another, as in norm-based, nor are they evaluated based on predetermined standards, as in criterion-referenced. Assessment in LOA primarily takes the form of feedback and marking assignments. (Derakhshan & Ghiasvand, 2022)

It is fundamental to establish clear assessment criteria that balance both language and content objectives, ensure adequate training for educators in assessment practices, and explore the use of innovative assessment methods that cater to the unique needs of Algerian students.

In sum, by incorporating LOA into the assessment process, educators can gain a more accurate picture of their students' language and content knowledge and provide feedback to support their

learning and growth. The framework ensures the dynamic, interactive relationships between instruction, learning, and assessment inside the classroom (Caroll, 2017).

6. Conclusion and Recommendations

The integration of content and language in Algerian higher education is a complex issue that requires a holistic approach. Challenges and teaching barriers arise due to the lack of coordination between content and language teachers, the lack of needs analysis, lack of relevant textbooks, problem of assessment and absence of adequate teacher training program. It is crucial to have a multidimensional approach that takes into account several elements in order to overcome these obstacles. This paper calls for the adoption of the learning-oriented assessment (LOA) framework as a promising solution to the issues raised. LOA prioritizes formative assessment, which provides students with ongoing feedback, inform teachers of the needs of their students, and encourage collaboration between language and content teachers. This paper also calls for the collaboration and support from different stakeholders, such as syllabus designers, university teachers, language and subject matter experts, and the community.

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