

English for specific purposes culture in Moroccan higher education: realities and challenges

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ABSTRACT

In some educational contexts, English for specific purposes (ESP) is perceived to better align with learners' specific goals compared to general English (GE). In Morocco, higher education institutions have been increasingly offering ESP courses despite the little research on the extent to which those courses actually reflect an ESP culture. This research has so far focused only on individual initiatives or particular institutions. This study, however, set itself the more ambitious aim of investigating the existence of an ESP culture in six different Moroccan higher education institutions and identifying the constraints that hindered the development of this culture. The study used document analysis and semi-structured interviews as data collection instruments. A total of 63 English course documents from students were subjected to qualitative content analysis, followed by a thematic analysis of data collected from six interviews with English instructors. The data identified both ESP and GE approaches across the institutions in the study. However, ESP seemed to be higher in highly competitive and interdisciplinary institutions, whereas GE was higher in less competitive institutions with similar majors. GE practices persisted due to revealed challenges that hamper effective ESP implementation. These findings suggest that Moroccan higher education institutions generally lack a strong ESP culture. The apparent importance of ESP in Morocco does not extend to the level of adopting an explicitly articulated ESP curriculum.

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1. INTRODUCTION

After the Second World War, due to the great economic power of the United States of America, English became the international language that many people started using in various fields [1]. The objective of these people was not to learn English for pleasure but rather to use it for their specific needs. Since then, English for specific purposes (ESP) has been adopted by most, if not all, disciplines in many different countries [2].

In Morocco, the situation has not been much different. Recognizing the importance of English in the job market and its global dominance in the production of knowledge, Moroccan policymakers and higher education officials have been insisting on students' mastering the English language for the past decade [3]. This insistence has reached the point where English is now believed to be the language that might replace French [3], [4]. This is despite the fact that French holds the role of the first foreign language in Morocco [5], [6] and serves as the medium of instruction in science and technology in most Moroccan universities.

As a response to the increasing interest in the English language, the Moroccan Ministry of Higher Education has implemented many measures to strengthen the presence of English in the educational system. One of these measures is incorporating English language courses into the curricula of non-English major disciplines at the tertiary level. English as a foreign language is now a compulsory course in all non-English language majors for undergraduate, graduate, and doctoral students in Moroccan public universities starting from the 2023-2024 academic year [7]–[9]. This indicates a growing recognition of the significance of the English language.

Amid this context, where there is an ever-growing interest in English and a greater number of English courses offered at the tertiary level, there has been no systematic evaluation of these courses to see the extent to which they reflect a tradition of ESP. As will be demonstrated later in this section, ESP research in the Moroccan context has been conducted at a micro level, focusing mainly on particular schools or faculties. This study, on the other hand, attempts to encompass many faculties and schools to explore the culture of ESP at a macro level. Examining ESP as a cultural component at the Moroccan tertiary level not only helps identify the constraints of ESP implementation but also reflects on the consistency of ESP's presence in the Moroccan higher educational system as an English language teaching approach. In fact, it is believed that deeply rooted concepts in a culture, may, to some extent, resist change and persist over time [10], [11].

To examine if ESP is considered a cultural component in a certain context, one should consider the views of stakeholders on the ESP courses that are taught in the institutions they are involved in. In an environment that celebrates a tradition of ESP, these stakeholders, namely decision-makers, administrators, subject-matter instructors, English language teachers, and students are all aware of ESP and are accustomed to collaborating with each other to decide on every aspect related to its teaching and learning. This would be a sign of having an ESP culture, which values the ESP approach and considers it important. This culture would intrinsically promote all the facets of pedagogical implications related to ESP implementation, namely needs analysis, syllabus content, teaching methodology, assessment, and evaluation. Describing this environment allows for the inference that implementing ESP courses in non-English major disciplines would not suffice for such a culture. Rather, it would opt for implementing established ESP programs that are made of a series of courses and span multiple semesters so as to cover all the different aspects of the English language that students need in their fields.

After the aforementioned description of a perfect environment of an ESP culture, several key questions arise: to what extent does this environment exist at the Moroccan tertiary level? Also, in case the Moroccan tertiary level environment does not reflect a culture of ESP to a large extent, what could be the obstacles hindering the growth of an ESP culture? Based on the findings of this study, what implications can be drawn regarding the state of ESP in the Moroccan tertiary context? These are the main questions this research tries to answer. Throughout the literature, it is noticed that the consistency of ESP can be fragile in contexts that do not celebrate a strong tradition of ESP. For instance, a study by Swales *et al.* [12] highlights how the ESP approach can fade away amidst the changes at the administration level. Their experience in attempting to design and implement an ESP course for architecture students at a US university made them realize that the slightest curriculum modifications may impact the experience of ESP teaching. They noticed that the modification in the timing concerning a theory/history course, which used to be taught in the second semester but was now switched to the first semester, caused the instructor to think about changes related to speaking and writing skills rapidly. Another remark was related to the resignation of the director of the overall targeted program, which might have later led to having another staff member who was unfamiliar with ESP [12].

In the Moroccan context, little to no research has been conducted in this regard. However, some studies have focused on assessing the effectiveness of the English courses taught at specific schools. For example, a study in engineering education investigates, through a needs analysis administered to students, the extent to which the English courses offered to students of the National School of Applied Sciences (ENSA) in the Moroccan town of Al-Hoceima were successful in meeting the job requirements [13]. The results reveal that the courses that were offered did not align with the needs mentioned by the students in the needs analysis. To address this issue, the study devises an ESP course that is related to the students' specialization and meets their needs.

Similarly, another study examines the alignment of the English courses with Islamic studies students' needs at Dar El Hadith El Hassania Institute in Rabat [14]. The results report that tasks related to grammar and vocabulary met the students' needs to a reasonable extent. On the other hand, the students report that the English courses did not help them much in productive skills, namely speaking and writing. Apart from this, and relevant enough to mention, this study also conducted interviews with English teachers at the institute, which revealed that the English syllabus had undergone many changes, and it was the English instructors who took the initiative to implement English for Islamic studies (EIS) after they had been teaching English for general purposes.

The review of the two previously mentioned studies shows that ESP research in the Moroccan context has primarily focused on particular schools or institutes within a certain university. Additionally, their primary concern is to investigate whether or not the courses offered at these institutions reflect the students' needs, which indicates that they consider ESP solely as an approach. This study, on the other hand, both builds on the insights of these studies and differs from them in two ways. The first aspect is related to the fact that this study extends their scope by moving beyond examining ESP in one institution to encompassing many institutions, which allows for a more comprehensive understanding of ESP practices across the institutions under study. The second aspect, which is possible only by encompassing many institutions, is that this study not only attempts to explore ESP as an approach, but also as a cultural component at the tertiary level. In other words, unlike the two aforementioned studies, instead of delving into the analysis of students' needs and the alignment of the offered courses with these needs, this study seeks to move beyond merely exploring what is taught in English classes by approaching ESP from an angle that considers it as a cultural construct, thereby allowing for an investigation of the extent to which a culture of ESP exists.

The novelty of this study thus lies in zooming out to adopt a multi-institutional perspective within a Moroccan university instead of focusing on one particular institution. Additionally, another aspect that potentially contributes to the originality of this study is the introduction of a new perspective from which researchers might approach ESP, namely, examining ESP as a cultural component in a certain space. This novelty is arguably valuable, as the lens for ESP examination that this study suggests, and which contains the keyword "culture", could help open other avenues for researchers in the ESP community. For instance, instead of simply implementing ESP at a certain space without taking into account the readiness of that space to adopt the ESP approach, researchers might begin to consider the nature of the environment where ESP is to be implemented. This involves assessing whether the space has the necessary seeds that can foster an effective ESP implementation. Also, by looking at ESP as a culture, researchers may be better positioned to examine the resilience of existing ESP practices. This means they can explore whether the ESP practice is part of a robust culture that can be sustained amidst curricular or administrative changes that might occur at the institutional level in the future, or if it is just a fragile, superficial add-on within a space that lacks a cultural foundation of ESP, and which might easily fade away amidst the slightest changes that may occur at the institutional level. These potential avenues stem from, and are arguably made possible by, the cultural lens through which the study examines ESP.

Before moving to the methodology, and having already described what is meant by ESP as a cultural component, it is deemed necessary at this stage to propose a working definition of ESP itself, which guides this study. Although there is a lack of consensus within the ESP community regarding what ESP is, there are recurrent themes that appear across multiple definitions. One theme is learner needs. For example, Nunan [15] describes ESP as a subcomponent of language teaching that "reflects the communicative needs of disparate groups of learners." Munby [16] defines ESP courses as those in which the syllabus and materials are established by the analysis of the learners' needs. Another theme is that ESP is narrower in scope compared with general English (GE). For instance, Barnard and Zemach [17] state that ESP courses are "usually more focused in their aims and make use of a narrower range of topics." Holme [18] recognizes that both GE and ESP start by assessing the learners' needs, and ESP is "simply a narrowing of this needs spectrum." Based on the previously mentioned themes, a working definition of ESP for this study is that it is an approach to language teaching which is distinguished from GE by its narrow scope and in which learners' needs analysis to shape the content and methodology of the course is prioritized.

2. METHOD

The aim of this study was to explore the extent to which the ESP approach is embedded as a cultural practice at Sidi Mohamed Ben Abdellah University. Six different institutions that belong to the university were chosen for data collection. These were the Faculty of Medicine, Pharmacy, and Dentistry (FMPDF), the Faculty of Sciences and Technology (FST), the Faculty of Sciences in Dhar El Mehraz (FSDM), the Faculty of Law, Economics, and Social Sciences (FSJES), the National School of Commerce and Management (ENCG), and the School of Applied Sciences (ENSA). The researchers opted for a qualitative approach in order to have an in-depth understanding of the current ESP practices at the university. The research instruments used were document analysis and semi-structured interviews, as these two research instruments could be used in research related to the analysis or exploration of the situation of ESP in a certain context [19]. Document analysis is defined as an analytical method in qualitative research that aims to review or evaluate documents in order to elicit meaning and gain understanding of data [20], [21]. These documents include any form of recorded written text or image. A semi-structured interview can be defined as

a qualitative research method that allows the researcher to ask predetermined open-ended questions, while allowing room for any other additional questions that can be useful for the research [22].

The purpose of document analysis in this study was to obtain an initial understanding of ESP practices at the university. Therefore, the documents used were students' English language class documents, namely, lessons from a course, exercises from a course, and course descriptive tables. These documents gave insights into whether the lessons were aligned with the principles of ESP or GE. ESP literature often highlights that although there might not be a sharp boundary between ESP and GE, ESP tends to be narrower in the students' needs spectrum compared with GE [17], [18], and therefore its courses are more focused and cover narrower topics. This particular aspect from the ESP literature served as a framework for the analysis of the students' notes. The results of the analysis provided initial data about classroom practices, which informed some of the semi-structured interview questions.

As for the semi-structured interviews, they were designed for professors of English who taught at the six institutions (FMPDF, FST, FSDM, FSJES, ENCG, and ENSA). These interviews aimed to uncover inquiries into the environment of these institutions and the extent to which this environment reflected a tradition of ESP. Therefore, the questions revolved around stakeholders' awareness of ESP and the collaboration between them concerning the pedagogical implications of the ESP approach.

Concerning the data collection procedures, the researchers used a convenience sampling method for both the document analysis and semi-structured interviews. This method allowed the researchers to quickly and efficiently gather data from readily available participants. Students on campus were approached in person by researchers, and those who were willing to participate shared their documents. These documents were handwritten students' notes, handouts, PPT screenshots from class, and PDF or PPT files containing lessons. The students who provided handouts and handwritten notes allowed the researchers to take pictures of their documents, while others, who did not take notes, shared PDF files, PPT files, or just pictures of the PPT slides their English professors shared with them in class.

As previously mentioned, the data gathered was about a particular lesson or exercise from a course, while other data showed the course descriptive tables the English professors shared with their students at the beginning of the course. This data was useful as it provided a structural overview of the course content. The number of documents was based on the availability and students' willingness to participate. However, researchers ensured an approximately equal number of documents from each institution, ranging from 8 to 12. In total, the sample of the documents consisted of 63 documents combined. To ensure credibility and minimize selection bias, only one document was taken from each participant to provide a broad representation of documents across the same institution. Also, the choice of the document was based only on the availability of the document, meaning that the first document participants had access to was the one used, regardless of its content or type. As for the semi-structured interviews, researchers found the English professors who taught at these institutions, and they directly contacted and asked them to participate in the study. Six English professors participated in this study, with each interviewee from one of the six previously mentioned institutions.

Qualitative content analysis was used to analyze the documents. This was a research technique that used a subjective interpretation of text data content through systematic classification via coding and theme or pattern identification [23]. A summative approach to qualitative content analysis was employed. This means that the analysis began with the identification and quantification of certain words or content in order to understand their contextual use [23]. Since it was a qualitative analysis, the aim was not merely to count the appearance of words or content (manifest content analysis) [24], [25], but also to interpret and discover underlying meanings of words or content (latent content analysis) [24], [25]. The researchers began by meticulously reviewing all the collected documents and categorizing the documents' content. One code—contextual relevance—was developed, under which two categories were used: ESP-content and GE-content. Table 1 illustrates the procedure followed to assign these categories to the documents, using two document examples from the actual data. Contextual relevance:

- ESP-content: lessons or exercises on a topic related to the field of the student who shared the document.
- GE-content: lessons or exercises on a general topic, without any relevance to the specific field of the student who shared the document.

It is important to note that the choice of whether the content was considered ESP or GE was subjective to the researchers' interpretation. The researchers did not categorize content as ESP unless they determined that it was narrow in scope and covered specialized content. Additionally, even if the content was narrow in scope, it was not categorized as ESP unless it was aligned with the specific field of the student who shared the note. Specialized content about, say, biology, was not categorized as ESP if it was shared by a student who specialized in, say, computer sciences.

Following the document analysis, the researchers used semi-structured interviews with the aim of exploring the extent to which the culture of ESP existed in the six selected institutions of Sidi Mohamed Ben Abdellah University. The data collected from the interviews was analyzed using thematic analysis,

as outlined in Braun and Clarke [26]. This approach involved identifying, analyzing, and finding patterns within the data. It was considered suitable for interviews because it let the researchers systematically explore the participants' perspectives and experiences related to the research context [27]. By organizing data into themes, thematic analysis provided a structured approach to understanding complex issues in the data [28]. The thematic analysis began with the transcription of interview recordings using the AI tool Cockatoo, followed by repeated reading of the transcripts to ensure familiarity with the data. The researchers then coded recurring ideas on spreadsheets and grouped the codes into themes reflecting meaningful patterns. These patterns included ESP awareness, needs analysis, pedagogical practices, institutional support, challenges, and collaboration.

Table 1. Procedure for assigning the categories based on the developed code, using examples from the data

Code	Document example (from data)	Rationale for categorization	Category assigned
Contextual relevance	Lesson titled "Medical Suffixes", introducing vocabulary containing targeted medical suffixes such as "-itis", "-osis", "-ectomy", "-otomy", along with their meanings.	This topic clearly relates to the student's field (medicine).	ESP-content
Contextual relevance	Vocabulary exercise introducing words like "discount," "cashier," "boutique," and "receipt," used in everyday shopping situations.	The task practices general vocabulary about shopping, which is unrelated to the student's field.	GE-content

Reliability and validity, or what is often referred to in qualitative research as dependability and credibility, were addressed in this study through different strategies. One strategy to support reliability was that researchers made sure to use one uniform criterion to collect the documents (taking only the first document given by each participant), since it helped minimize selection bias. Reliability was also addressed by using the same code (contextual relevance) under the same two categories (ESP content and GE content) throughout all the gathered documents across all the institutions. Similarly, the interviews were led by the same researcher, using the same interview guide in order to enhance procedural reliability. All of these strategies contributed to a more dependable and less subjective analysis. Regarding validity in this study, the document analysis was guided by a clearly defined analytical framework that is grounded in ESP literature, particularly the distinction between ESP and GE practices in terms of needs specificity and content focus. Thus, what can be considered a form of construct validity was ensured since the two developed categories (ESP content and GE content) used to analyze the documents were aligned with the widely accepted definitions within the ESP community.

Researchers acknowledged that the number of documents gathered from each institution is relatively low for a more generalized statistical analysis, which may have affected the stability of the frequency-based patterns. However, it is important to note that the main concern was not to conduct a statistical analysis but rather to gain a first-hand overview of the ESP practices in these institutions, which allowed for a qualitative analysis. The qualitative analysis lay in making initial inferences based on the frequency of ESP and GE appearances, allowing researchers to develop some patterns that were later discussed (confirmed or questioned) in the semi-structured interviews to check for their validity. By supporting the document analysis results with the semi-structured interviews, the study enhanced validity by employing progressive validation through triangulation. Another dimension of validity, namely internal validity, was also established since the inferred patterns from the document analysis were discussed in the semi-structured interviews, demonstrating coherence between the two research instruments.

Both the document analysis and the interviews followed ethical research principles to ensure the integrity and respectful handling of data. For the document analysis, all documents, including students' notes, handouts, and course materials, were collected with informed consent. The researchers ensured participants understood the purpose and scope of the research. Anonymity and confidentiality were maintained by removing any identifiers that could link to specific individuals or institutions, though in the results of document analysis, partially compromising institutions' anonymity was required to provide findings for the study. For the interviews, participants were informed of the voluntary nature of their participation. Similar to the document analysis, anonymity and confidentiality were maintained in the interview analysis by using coded identifiers to make sure that no personal information could be linked to participants. Consent was obtained for recording interviews, and the researchers informed all participants that the data would be used only for academic purposes.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results are divided into two sub-subsections: document analysis results and semi-structured interview results. In the first sub-subsection, the findings of the document analysis are presented, along with inferences that are later either supported or challenged in the discussion subsection based on insights from the semi-structured interviews. The second sub-subsection presents the findings of the semi-structured interviews, highlighting the core themes that are determined after the thematic analysis. The final subsection, discussion, combines and examines the findings from both the document analysis and the interviews. This combination provides a comprehensive interpretation of the results in relation to the research questions.

3.1. Results

3.1.1. Document analysis results

Document analysis was conducted to examine the presence of ESP and GE practices across the institutions under study and to interpret the meaning behind their distribution. The frequency of ESP and GE practices is illustrated in Figure 1 by showing the number of ESP and GE documents found in each of the six institutions. As Figure 1 shows, both ESP and GE practices were identified across all the institutions. Some examples of ESP content documents contained a short text about the human body systems. The text was then followed by comprehension questions. Another example was about writing an abstract of a research paper. Given that the students who shared these particular documents that are described here as examples specialized in a field that was directly related to their documents' contents, it can be inferred that their English teachers were implementing topics that were narrow in scope and that targeted these students' needs, which may be the ability to read research articles and write abstracts for future research in their fields. Shifting the focus now to GE practices, one example of GE content was a document containing a short paragraph about daily routines students had to write in class using the simple present. Other examples included the course descriptive tables that were about general themes such as shopping and travel. The researchers interpreted these documents as being large in scope, dealing with general everyday topics, and therefore far from the students' fields.

Additionally, as shown in Figure 1, the frequency of ESP practices was higher in the first four institutions, whereas the frequency of GE practices was higher in the last two institutions. This led the researchers to develop a pattern concerning the nature of the first four and last two institutions. The pattern was related to the selection process of the students who enroll at these institutions. In fact, the first four institutions are limited-access institutions, meaning that not all students who apply are accepted. Instead, there is a competitive selection process based on students' grades in the final year of high school (referred to as the *baccalauréat*). On the other hand, the last two institutions are open-access institutions, meaning that all students who apply get accepted, regardless of how their grades in the final year of high school are. As a result, students who enroll in the first four institutions tend to be high achievers compared with those who enroll in the last two institutions. It can be inferred from this that, given the high level of students, teachers who taught in the first four institutions tended to find it easier to implement ESP courses. In the last two institutions, however, teachers might have found it hard to implement ESP courses since they had low achievers who were very likely to have a low English level.

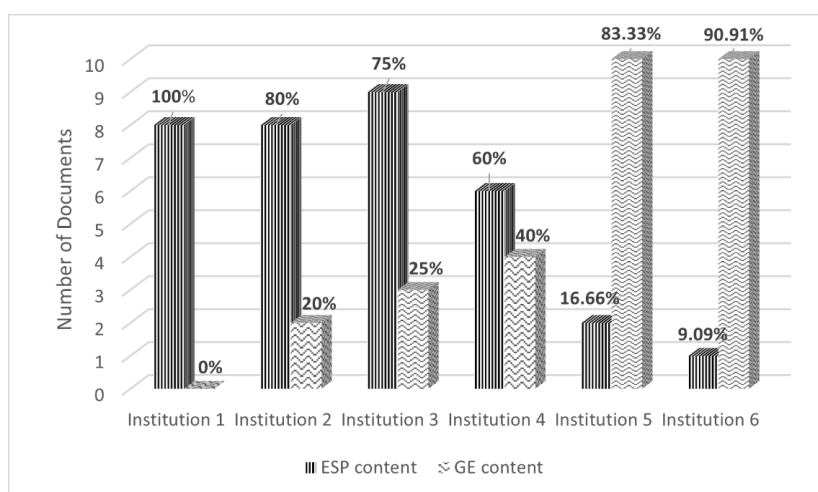


Figure 1. Frequency of ESP vs GE across six institutions

Low English level was also another observed pattern in the last two institutions that can indirectly support the first pattern. Many notes that were shared by students from these institutions contain very basic English content. An example would be a handwritten note containing the verb to be in the simple present. If the student who shared this particular document had a high level of English, it is possible that they might not have written down this note in their copybook. It can be inferred from this that students' low English level might have been an obstacle that hindered English teachers from implementing ESP courses in these institutions.

Another identified pattern was that the last two open-access institutions with high GE frequency tended to be multidisciplinary, meaning that they encompass fields of study that may seem, to some extent, relatively disparate, such as mechanics and biology. This was also true for institution four, which is a multidisciplinary limited-access institution. The fact that it is multidisciplinary made the GE frequency a bit higher compared with the first three institutions even if it is a limited-access institution. On the other hand, the first three institutions, which showed higher ESP content frequencies, tended to be, to some extent, interdisciplinary, meaning that they focus on disciplines that are relatively aligned, such as medicine, pharmacy, and dentistry. It can be inferred from this pattern that instructors may have been teaching multiple fields, which made it difficult to design ESP courses for all the disparate fields.

3.1.2. Semi-structured interviews results

The thematic analysis of the interviews further explored the issue of ESP in Moroccan higher education. Six themes emerged after a thematic analysis of the interview data:

- a. ESP awareness (12 mentions): interviewees made the distinction between ESP and GE, stressing the importance of adapting language instruction to students' professional and academic needs. Some noted a lack of boundaries between ESP and general language teaching due to students' levels of English proficiency.
- b. Needs analysis (13 mentions): interviewees said that they conduct informal needs analyses through discussions, surveys, or placement tests to identify students' requirements. There was a consensus on the importance of adapting the course content to fit with students' fields of study; however, limited resources present an obstacle in the way of a comprehensive needs assessment.
- c. Pedagogical practices (43 mentions): this was a dominant theme, highlighting innovative teaching methods such as task-based learning, role-playing, and collaborative projects. Interviewed professors said that they often integrate ESP materials, such as specific terminology and practical tasks, despite challenges related to students' proficiency levels.
- d. Institutional support (20 mentions): professors in the interviews mentioned their appreciation of the support provided in terms of administrative flexibility and resources. However, there is still a continuous demand for improved multimedia resources, discipline-specific materials, and classroom settings for interactive learning.
- e. Challenges (34 mentions): key challenges mentioned by the interviewees include: i) professors' limited familiarity with specialized fields like engineering, medicine, or business; ii) students' inconsistent English proficiency levels; and iii) time constraints in semesters that restrict in-depth coverage of ESP topics.
- f. Collaboration (16 mentions): interviewees reported minimal collaboration between language instructors and subject-matter experts. Professors expressed a need for teamwork to design effective ESP curricula and share teaching strategies.

3.2. Discussion

3.2.1. The extent of ESP culture at the Moroccan tertiary level

Analysis of the interviews reveals that the Moroccan tertiary education system demonstrates a limited and inconsistent implementation of ESP. While there is evidence of some alignment with ESP principles, the environment is far from reflecting a comprehensive or deeply embedded ESP culture. The inferences drawn from the documents' analysis results, namely the disparity between open-access and limited-access institutions, low English level, and the problem of multidisciplinary institutions, are all validated by the interviewees. Apart from this, contrary to what was described previously in this study as an environment of ESP culture, it seems that well-established ESP programs that span multiple semesters to cover all aspects of ESP are largely absent. In some cases, students do not start English language classes until the master's level, resulting in a three-year gap between high school and graduate school in their exposure to English during their undergraduate studies. However, there are some efforts in some institutions to implement ESP courses starting from the undergraduate level.

Another point that reflects a lack of ESP culture is that although English instructors demonstrated great awareness of ESP and willingness to effectively implement it in all institutions, other stakeholders,

according to the interviewees, may not see it as a critical issue. It seems that there is a common preconceived idea that English language courses are mere general education slot-fillers in non-English major curricula. As a result, other stakeholders may not effectively collaborate with English teachers to improve the state of English language teaching in these institutions. Therefore, instructors often make individual efforts to tailor their teaching to students' professional and academic needs, including conducting informal needs analyses and incorporating discipline-specific terminology, which is an additional burden. In fact, Basturkmen [19] and Yigitoglu [29] affirmed that designing an ESP course is a demanding task for teachers, as they have to investigate learners' needs beforehand. This aligns with findings from Ahmed [30], where he explained that the responsibilities of teachers of ESP were more complex and demanding than those of GE teachers.

Adding another layer of insight concerning the complexity of ESP teachers' tasks, the interviewees reported that the burden of tailoring their teaching to the students' needs became more pronounced in multidisciplinary institutions. In case the institutions encompass many different disciplines, it would be hard for, say, one English professor who is teaching classes from multiple departments, to conduct a systematic needs analysis in all the different departments and design an ESP course for each department. All of this indicates that while an interest in ESP exists at the tertiary level, it is not fully realized in practice. The University of Sidi Mohamed Ben Abdellah's tertiary education system thus exhibits an emerging but fragmented ESP environment, shaped more by individual efforts than institutional commitment.

3.2.2. Obstacles hindering the growth of an ESP culture

The growth of ESP culture in Moroccan universities is hindered by several challenges. One of the most critical challenges is the lack of specialized training for English instructors. Most professors teaching ESP have academic backgrounds in GE or literature; therefore, they might not have any experience in the technical or professional fields they are expected to teach. This corresponds with Elimadi findings [31], where she highlighted the scarcity of qualified teachers as a major challenge facing teaching ESP in Morocco. The gap in expertise limits ESP instructors' ability to design and deliver effective courses, which makes it difficult to cater to the specific needs of students in fields such as medicine, engineering, or business. This aligns with findings from Akhajam [32], where all the instructors he interviewed lacked formal training in ESP and preferred to teach GE.

Another challenge is the wide gap in students' English proficiency levels. Many students enter university with limited exposure to English, while others may have strong foundational skills. This is consistent with findings from the literature in the Moroccan context, where the range of language proficiency levels of students was seen to create a significant difficulty for instructors [33]. At the international level, many studies highlighted low English levels as a problem that crippled effective ESP implementation. For instance, a study in Vietnamese universities identified how different English proficiency levels in the same university impacted the teaching of ESP, reporting that students from language departments tended to have a higher level of English compared with students from technical and social departments [34]. Also, the study gave attention to how students' backgrounds affected the teaching of ESP, highlighting that students from the suburbs tended to have a low English level in comparison with those who came from big cities [34]. Another study in China analyzed the challenges faced in the development and practice of an English for industrial design course at the Sino-German Institute of Industrial Design. The study found that the first major challenge was the variations in students' proficiency level. This led to having different English language levels in the same ESP course, which made it difficult for teachers to teach and therefore affected the learning outcomes [35]. Heterogeneous English proficiency was also detected as a challenge that novice ESP teachers faced in Indonesia [36]. This heterogeneity forced professors to prioritize GE instruction, often at the expense of specialized content.

Returning to the results presented in the document analysis section, and based on the interviewees' responses, the wide variation in students' proficiency levels was indeed the reason behind resorting to GE courses, especially in open access institutions, where some students, according to some interviewees, had another foreign language in high school, and now were learning English for the first time. It is recurrent in the literature that ESP courses are meant for students who have at least some basic knowledge of English. For instance, in their variable characteristics of ESP, both Strevens [37] and Dudley-Evans and John [38] agreed that ESP assumes that learners have some level of English proficiency. Although it is just a variable characteristic of ESP, meaning that it is not an absolute requirement for a course to be qualified as ESP, it seems from these previously mentioned studies that this problem heavily impacts ESP effectiveness.

Time constraints further add to the issue because short semesters and limited weekly teaching hours do not allow for in-depth exploration of ESP topics. Resource limitation also plays a crucial role in the growth of ESP. Many institutions lack infrastructure, such as multimedia classrooms and discipline-related materials, that are necessary to support specialized learning. This is reflected in what was found in the literature [39]. In addition to the lack of resources, the absence of collaboration between language instructors and other experts further undermines efforts to create relevant ESP curricula. This is because without these

partnerships, professors are often left to design courses on their own, which can be a challenging task. These findings align with other studies on the ESP situation in Moroccan higher education [31], [32]. In sum, all of these aforementioned challenges expose the gaps that hinder the establishment of a robust ESP culture at the Moroccan tertiary level. Therefore, the existing environment, while it has potential, requires more effective interventions to overcome these obstacles.

3.2.3. Implications for the state of ESP in Moroccan higher education

The findings reveal the need for a strategic and holistic approach to improve the situation of ESP in Sidi Mohamed Ben Abdellah University. The institution should take into consideration certain reforms in order to build a more sustainable ESP culture and provide the students with more effective ESP courses. First, there should be more focus on the development of a standardized ESP framework that provides clear guidelines for course design, needs analysis, and assessment. This would guarantee a consistent and effective implementation of ESP principles across institutions. However, this cannot be achieved without training programs for English professors since such training is crucial to fill the gap in technical and professional knowledge that professors might have. By equipping instructors with the needed expertise to teach ESP, the university can improve the quality and relevance of ESP courses. In addition, this would provide the university with a cadre of English teachers specialized in different fields, and who could be deployed whenever there is a need in a certain institution within the university. Another aspect is collaboration between language instructors and experts from different fields, who should be encouraged to work together and develop courses that reflect the demands of the different professional fields. Moreover, in order to ensure that the curriculum meets students' academic and career needs, systematic needs analyses should become a part of ESP course planning.

Another area for improvement is the resources provided, so the university should invest in multimedia tools, interactive classrooms, and teaching materials that ESP classes need to create an environment suitable for specialized learning. Finally, in terms of the cultural level, promoting awareness of ESP as a significant part of higher education is vital. To achieve this, policymakers, administrators, and educators must recognize the value of ESP in preparing students for different academic and professional challenges. In conclusion, while the Moroccan tertiary education system has made efforts to engage with the teaching of English in non-major English disciplines at the tertiary level, major gaps exist in the implementation of an effective ESP approach. Addressing the challenges through institutional, curricular, and cultural reforms is crucial in building an effective ESP culture that meets the students' needs in higher education.

4. CONCLUSION

Based on the findings of this study, two conclusions can be drawn that are aligned with the research questions. Firstly, it can be concluded that there is no strong ESP culture at Sidi Mohamed Ben Abdellah University. The ESP practices presented in this study are not uniform across institutions and depend to a great degree on the initiative of individual instructors rather than being part of a standardized or systematic framework. In some cases, instructors successfully integrate ESP elements by focusing on field-specific communication skills, such as writing research papers or preparing professional presentations. Yet, the blending of GE with ESP remains common practice. In summary, while there is recognition among practitioners of the importance of the English language, this recognition does not seem to extend to the level that prompts decision-makers to give attention to critical details like a systematic implementation of an ESP curriculum. Secondly, the findings reveal that there are many obstacles hindering the growth of an ESP culture. These can be summarized as a lack of specialized training for English instructors, a lack of collaboration between English instructors and non-linguistic subject instructors, a wide discrepancy among students' English proficiency levels, time constraints, and a lack of resources and materials.

Based on these two conclusions, the study has highlighted the following implications: there is a need to promote awareness of ESP as a significant part of higher education, to develop a standardized ESP framework and conduct systematic needs analysis, to offer training programs for English professors, and to foster a culture of collaboration between language instructors and experts from different fields. As future research recommendations, this study encourages researchers to examine ESP as a cultural component within higher educational institutions. Approaching ESP from this angle will make researchers move beyond merely identifying obstacles that hamper effective ESP implementation to exploring how the institution's mindset and structure shape ESP sustainability, as well as considering strategies to foster a strong ESP culture that remains robust over time.

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Ayoub Ismaili Alaoui	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓		✓	✓		✓			
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C : **C**onceptualization

M : **M**ethodology

So : **S**oftware

Va : **V**alidation

Fo : **F**ormal analysis

I : **I**nvestigation

R : **R**esources

D : **D**ata Curation

O : **O**riting - **O**riginal Draft

E : **E**riting - **R**eview & **E**ditng

Vi : **V**isualization

Su : **S**upervision

P : **P**roject administration

Fu : **F**unding acquisition

CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

Authors state no conflict of interest.

INFORMED CONSENT

We have obtained informed consent from all individuals included in this study.

ETHICAL APPROVAL

The research related to human use has been complied with all the relevant national regulations and institutional policies in accordance with the tenets of the Helsinki Declaration and has been approved by the authors' institutional review board or equivalent committee.

DATA AVAILABILITY





The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author, [AIA]. The data, which contain information that could compromise the privacy of research participants, are not publicly available due to certain restrictions.

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