

# Analysis of ESP assessment modes and selection of grading components and criteria

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**Abstract:** Defining assessment and the selection of grading criteria in the context of English for Specific Purposes (ESP) courses have been an significant point of debate in the field of language learning and teaching. Language experts (McNamara, 1996, Bachman and Palmer (1996, Jacoby, 1998) propose different grading criteria and various modes of assessment for ESP courses. Dudley-Evans and St. John (1998) define the reasons and the benefits of assessment in the context of ESP courses. This article analyses the process of defining and assessing students' performance in the context of ESP (English for Specific Purposes) courses offered by the Language Center of South East European University, in Tetovo, Republic of Macedonia. This study reviews the issue of assessment in ESP through analysis of students' opinions and preferences of the assessed tasks and the comments related to assessed tasks and the grading criteria. The research method included in the study is a questionnaire containing open-ended questions which required from the ESP (English for Specific Purposes) students to comment on the level of difficulty, benefits and drawbacks on the assessed tasks in the context of ESP courses. The study attempts to provide conclusions and recommendations regarding assessment practices in English for Specific Purposes courses.

**Key words:** ESP, assessment in ESP

## Introduction

Assessing and measuring students' success in learning languages for specific purposes is a debatable topic in teaching languages for specific purposes. The reasons for applying assessment in teaching languages for specific purposes are perhaps best illustrated by the arguments that Boud (2007) provides when explaining the reasons for reframing assessment in higher education. Boud proposes that assessment in the context of higher education should be reframed around the theme of informed judgment. According to Boud (2007, p. 19) the purpose of assessment should be: "dots informing the capacity to evaluate evidence, appraise situations and circumstances astutely, to draw sound conclusions and act in accordance with this analysis. This is an idea that focuses on learning centrally—learning to form judgments—as well as on the act of forming judgments about learning—which might be used for validating purposes. This notion has the potential to incorporate a forward-looking dimension – informing judgment for future decisions making about learning."

The quote above accurately illustrates the notions about the aims and the purposes of assessment and assessment tasks in the context of the described ESP course. The essence of this idea is that assessment in an ESP course can enable the learners to make informed judgments at present, as well as in the future, as

future professionals in their respective content areas. This idea was dominant in the process of selection the assessed tasks and forming the ESP course grading criteria.

## 1 Modes of assessment and grading criteria

The modes and ways of forming and implementing the criteria for assessment are discussed in this study. The assessment discussed in this article is an integral part of the ESP (English for Specific Purposes) course designed for students of Contemporary Sciences and Department of Business Informatics.

Dudley Evans and St. John (1998, p. 210) define the ultimate goal of assessment in the context of ESP: “The ultimate proof for an ESP course is how well the learners fare when using English in their target situation; after the course they should be more effective and more confident using English their target situations. In many ESP situations tests might be inappropriate: on a short intensive course the time is needed for input and practice; the real effect is likely to show itself some time after the course.”

Dudley Evans and St. John (1998) define two methods of assessment: tests and continuous assessment. Both of these methods are applied in the context of the aforementioned course. According to Dudley Evans and St. John, the following table presents the differences between tests and continuous assessment.

Tab. 1: *Differences between tests and continuous assessment*

	Continuous assessment	Tests
How long is there?	Often no time limit	A set time limit
When is it done?	Over a period of time	One block of time
Where is it done?	In class, at home, in a library	In classroom or hall
How is it done?	May be able to ask questions, may discuss with others, may use books	Usually in silence, usually own work, may use a dictionary
Who sets the tasks?	Teacher, teacher and learner	Teacher or outsider
Who grades the work?	Teacher, learner, peers	Teacher or outsider

The chart above clearly represents the differences between continuous assessment and testing in the context of teaching languages for specific purposes. However, it is not possible to include only one of the above-described modes, since both of these modes have certain advantages and disadvantages. In addition, they contribute to the primary goal of enabling ESP learners to use the target language in specific situations and their future professional careers. It was clear that only a combination of those two modes, which involves including testing and tasks which will be assessed throughout the semester, can represent properly the need to form informed judgments and offer an objective and reasonable assessment.

Therefore the combination of assessment criteria in this particular ESP course included the following:

Tab. 2: *The overview of assessed tasks in the analyzed ESP course*

<i>Assessment criteria</i>	<i>Percent-ages</i>	<i>Additional explanation</i>
Attendance and participation	10%	Attendance is mandatory 70% of the classes. Participation includes participation in in-class discussion and participation in various activities, such as responding to questions and providing an opinion on a given topic.
Website evaluation (written)	15%	Website evaluation is a written assignment which includes selecting and analyzing a website (it can be a company website, University website, or any promotional or informative website depending on students' choice). Portals and search engines are excluded, due to their complexity and various functions, as well as social media. The website is evaluated on basis of specific criteria, including the links, the functionality, clear instructions / information, language used in the website, etc. Both positive and negative aspects of the website should be included in the website evaluation.
Report writing (written)	15%	An informal report writing follows a case study of a company is presented to the students, accompanied by a questionnaire in which the main problems of a company are presented: lack of facilities, no defined rate of overtime payment, no clear line of responsibility, etc. The students are asked to select a problem and provide 3 suggestions/ recommendations in order to solve it.
Presentation (oral, in-class, supported by Power Point)	15%	Presentations on pre-selected topics which include for instance, famous people in the history of IT, Artificial Intelligence, and other field related topics. The students are evaluated according to pre-defined criteria, including clarity and organization of the content, visual design of the slides, body language and eye contact with the audience, keeping the time limit and stating clear and consistent arguments.
Feedback on other students' presentations (in a written form)	5%	Students provide feedback to their classmates and they are required to assess other students' presentation, using the same set of grading criteria. This type of peer assessment also provides an insight into students' awareness of qualities of appropriate presentation.
Final exam (written)	30%	The purpose is to test the vocabulary acquired throughout the course and used in context, in addition to reading skills (reading for gist, detail, inferring) and grammar used in context.
In class debate (speaking activity)	10%	The purpose is to test speaking skills, persuasiveness and ability to state arguments clearly in favor of or against a given topic.

## 2 Characteristics of the assessment modes

The previous chapter describes combination of the assessment modes used in ESP (English for Specific Purposes) course for students of Computer Sciences and Technologies at South East European University. From the chart, it can be seen that both assessment modes are implemented.

Dudley Evans and St. John (1998, p. 213) discuss the purpose of testing in ESP courses. They define their major purpose as follows: "ESP tests may be given as part of PSA (Present Situation Analysis), to check progress or to measure proficiency." Dudley Evans and St. John (1998) proceed to describe the three different types of testing: placement testing which is done prior to the courses, progress and achievement tests which measure the mastery of class work and the syllabus, as well as proficiency testing, which measures the performance of the students in their target language tasks.

Fulcher (1999) argues that ESP tests should be derived from the students' needs and therefore to reflect the content area—in the case studied in this article the content area would be related to Computer Sciences and Business. The final exam (test) which is offered at the end of the semester and the end of the ESP course can be described as an achievement test. It is focused on measuring the mastery of the syllabus requirements in terms of vocabulary acquisition and learning the proper grammar items. In addition, the test includes assessment of reading comprehension skills tested on texts with a content related topic. However, it is important to emphasize that the test percentage is 30 %, which means that the importance of testing is not overestimated when planning the assessment criteria.

A number of studies dealt with various models of assessment and aims of graded tasks in an ESP setting. Jacoby and McNamara (1999) analyze the assessment and assessment criteria in LSP (Languages for Specific Purposes) assessment. In their article, they discuss the "primarily linguistic orientation" of ESP assessment. Bachman and Palmer (1982) analyzed three different traits of assessing proficiency: linguistic competence, pragmatic competence and sociolinguistic competence as components of communicative competence. Jacoby (1998, in Douglas, 2001) investigates the rehearsal of conference presentations delivered by physicists in a group which was peer-assessed with criteria defined beforehand, after which the members of the group provided feedback on the performance. Jacoby (1998, in Douglas, 2001) uses the term indigenous assessment criteria: criteria used by subject specialists (health professionals for instance) to assess the communicative performance in vocational fields and professional environments. Jacoby and McNamara (1999) found a significant discrepancy between linguistic performance measured by tests and peer assessment in vocational fields. Douglas (2001) discusses the necessity of analyzing the assessment interaction and discourse in TLU (Target Language Use) situations.

A conclusion which might be derived from these studies is that in ESP contexts there is a difference between the following two aspects: testing and assessment of graded tasks. Reducing the discrepancy between these two aspects and using a combination of these modes of assessment is probably among the most important issues that an ESP practitioner has to deal with. Therefore, apart from the achievement test described above, two written tasks were developed. The pur-

pose of these tasks was to put the language in a specific content-related context and to assess student language performance as well. The presentation had same purpose—using language in a content-related context. In addition, the debate also had a similar goal: using the target language and specific speaking skills as well as developing solid argumentation in a content-related setting.

### 3 Students' comments on assessed tasks

This study apart from presenting the modes of assessment designed for an ESP (English for Specific Purposes) course, also aims to present students' perceptions of the usefulness, objectivity and appropriateness of the assessed tasks. The survey (questionnaire) was distributed to 37 students who took the ESP for Computer Sciences and Business Informatics course at the end of the semester, after the final exam. Their linguistic proficiency varies from intermediate to upper intermediate. They responded to series of open-ended questions in a written form and anonymously. The aim was to give a chance to the students to express their opinions and add their comments on the tasks which were part of the assessment criteria. In addition, they were asked to provide suggestions and ideas for further improvement and development of the course assessment. This part of the article will also provide a summary of some of the comments that the students gave on the assessed tasks and assessment in general.

#### 3.1 Website evaluation

The majority of students' responses (34 out of 37) indicated that the students responded positively to this assignment. These are some of the comments:

- *We learned to evaluate the positive and negative sides of a website. I was aware even before of the qualities of a good website, but the assignment helped me to think about this topic in more detail.*
- *I liked this assignment because it is related to my studies—after all, we should be able to create a website even at this point. It was useful to think about the aspects of a website and to analyze them. I do not like writing, but this assignment was interesting and not too difficult.*

#### 3.2 Report writing

Students' opinions about report writing were divided. While more than half of the students were aware of the benefits of the assignments (19), a significant number of students (18) found the assignment to be complicated and challenging. Students' suggestions also included simplifying the instructions and the task.

- *In my opinion, this assignment was a bit complicated: we had to analyze a situation, identify problems and (this was difficult for me at least) to provide solutions. Still I think it was useful and that we will have to do this when we start working.*
- *It was not easy, mostly because I had to analyze several different problems and then provide solutions. I could not think of any solutions for some of the problems.*

- *Perhaps in the future, we can have an outline or a form to fill in, instead of writing the report, or a sample report which can be helpful.*

### **3.3 Presentations/ feedback to other students**

Most of the students (35 of them) found the presentations to be interesting and useful. In addition, it can be concluded from the replies that this task supports their language skills in other content areas and they considered this task helpful for every subject and course. The comments include the following:

- *I think that presentations were an excellent way to research a topic related to our area of study and to learn something new. I think that it was useful to evaluate our classmates and this helped me with my presentation.*
- *I think that the presentations helped us a lot. I practiced and learned to speak in front of the class. I used to be afraid of that.*
- *The presentations were the best way to improve our speaking skills. I did not like writing feedback to other students because I had to be strict. Still it helped me to prepare my own presentation.*
- *It helped us to interact and communicate our opinions to other students. We were a little bit stressed during the presentation*

### **3.4 Debate and in class discussions**

Debates and in-class discussions were a considered as a very appropriate way of improving speaking skills and welcomed by the vast majority of students. These are some of the comments:

- *The discussions and the debates helped me to express my opinion and my ideas and to feel free to discuss in front of other students in the group ...*
- *The debate was helpful for us to develop my speaking skill. I need it because I am shy and not very outspoken, so I had a chance to practice and speak.*
- *The debate and the discussions helped us to think and to offer arguments in favor of or against a given topic. That is important because we learnt to respect other people's opinion.*

### **3.5 Final exam**

The comments and the opinions related to the final exam were also divided. Approximately one third of the students (12 students) provided some positive comments about the exam, stating that the exam questions were related to the material covered in class. However, the rest of the students (26) believed that testing and final examinations can be replaced by other assignments in terms of grading criteria and as a result removed from the course or modified in some other way with different question types. These are some of the comments:

- *It was OK in terms of difficulty and well organized. Still I have to mention the stress that every student feels when we take a test. The instructions were clear.*

- *My only remark is that the questions were multiple choice questions only. Perhaps some other type of questions should be added.*
- *I think that many students study for exams only. Therefore we need exams.*
- *I believe that other assignments give us more objective grades since we have more time to prepare them.*

## 4 Conclusions and recommendations

Several conclusions can be drawn from students' comments and replies. The first conclusion is that in ESP context, they prefer to work and to be assessed on tasks which are related to the content area of their studies. In addition, they prefer assignments that provide them with an opportunity to apply the knowledge or skills gained in their present or future practice. Furthermore, it can be concluded that the students prefer to work on tasks which are accompanied with clear instructions and sample or model tasks.

In addition, the assignments which help them explore topics and content related to their future studies are welcomed by the students in ESP (English for Specific Purposes) context. It can be emphasized that the assessment and the assessed tasks (Spirovska Tevdovska, 2015) should reinforce the learning skills which are transferable and possible to implement in other subject areas apart from language learning, for instance presenting or debating. The importance of incorporating elements of peer and self-assessment is also important, which was perceived by students as a process which helps them prepare for their own assignments.

Finally, it can be concluded that the selection of assessed tasks and assessment criteria in EAP courses is not a straightforward process. Nevertheless, the aims of objective assessment and the selection of assessed tasks can be achieved by taking into consideration the context of ESP courses and students' needs and expectations. Above all, when selecting the assessment criteria, ESP practitioners should take into account the fact that assessment needs to foster students' learning.

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## Appendix

### Students' Questionnaire

*Course ESP CS BI*

*Please comment on the following assignments and tasks (what were their advantages or disadvantages, how would you improve them)*

a. Website evaluation

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b. Presentations/feedback

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c. Report writing

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d. Debates/ Discussions (in-class-after the presentations)

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e. Final exam

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