

# The Problems Encountered by Teachers and Learners of English in Non-English Departments at the Algerian University

## *The Case of Third Year Biology Students at Akli Mohand Oulhadj University-Bouira-*

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**Abstract:** English has acquired a unique and special status among languages of the world and it has been acknowledged as a 'global language'. This position was the result of the dominating role of English speaking countries in the fields of economy, science, technology and politics. This led more and more people to use this language in a growing number of occupational and educational contexts. Nowadays, scientists and researchers show an eager need to learn English in order to have access to English written documents and participate in international conferences. However, the majority of Algerian students in different departments of different majors show a lack of proficiency in this language. Biology students at Akli Mohand Oulhadj University of Bouira are no exception. This study aims at highlighting the teaching / learning conditions of English at the Biology department in the University of Bouira and shedding light on the different problems encountered by both teachers and learners of the same department. It aims, also, at searching for the different reasons that lead to unsuccessful achievement and the students' difficulties when faced with materials of their specialty written in English. For this purpose, it seems necessary to briefly review the relevant literature related to the field of ESP. since our study falls under the frame of quantitative studies whose aim is to present pictures of the group under investigation, the descriptive statistical method seems to be adequate relying on the questionnaire and the structured interview as data collection tools. The questionnaire is addressed to third year biology students and the interview is held with teachers of English at the same department. The results will be presented by percentages. The latter will be provided by the means of tables and histograms (chart pie) for the close-ended questions. Open-ended questions will be followed by small comments summarizing the respondents' propositions.

**Keywords:** Collaboration, Course Design, English for Specific Purposes, ESP Practitioner, Needs Analysis

## Introduction

The economic, technological and scientific development of many English-speaking countries has led English to become the world language. It is the lingua franca through which a large body of documents is being published. Success in either academic or professional settings is quite linked to the ability to speak English, write in English and read a large proportion of documents written in English. Ewer and Lattore (1967) claim that success in graduate work is becoming more and more related to the ability to read the appropriate literature in English and to take part in international conferences where the greatest part of the contacts take place through the medium of English.

Algerian students of different majors, who seek to graduate or finish their post graduate studies, are always faced with documents written in English. In fact, the majority of them are not aware of the significance of English at an early point. They realize the need for it during their last year especially during the writing of their theses or research papers since they need to read documentation of their specialty written in English. Biology students are not an exception. The

problem is that most of them are not able to read, interact correctly or understand the English language in general and the scientific discourse in particular.

An Informal interview with some of biology students at the University of Bouira revealed that most of them avoid documents written in English and rely, instead, on references written in Arabic and/or French, even though, they know that reading articles written in English would enrich their research works. Hence, this study aims at shedding light on the different problems students encounter when dealing with references published in English and highlight the different factors that lead to such problems. Meanwhile, it highlights the teaching/ learning conditions of ESP in the Algerian university.

## I. Literature Review

### A. Defining ESP

ESP is a branch of linguistics that relates the teaching/ learning process to learners' needs. It arose as a term in the 60's when General English courses didn't seem adequate to fulfill learners and employers' needs. It has grown rapidly as English continues to dominate as a language of science, technology, business, and publishing. In fact, ESP is that kind of English teaching that is built upon what has been acquired in General English with more restricted orientation. It is that kind of language presented to learners to meet specific needs in a particular domain, vocation or occupation. As the number of scholars who have attempted to define it, many definitions have been suggested.

For Mackey and Mountford (1978), ESP is a language needed for a 'clearly utilitarian purpose' (p2). This purpose is related to learners 'needs in different settings that can be occupational like civil airline pilots, vocational training programs, e.g. for hotel staff, or academic or professional study like medicine and law. They see ESP as that special language that takes place in specific settings by certain participants who are usually adults. They focus on adults because adults are more conscious of the reasons behind learning English for a determined field of specialization, and who need English to further their knowledge in their specialty or to perform a social or a working role.

Mackey and Mountford (*ibid.* 4-5) also make a distinction between two notions: 'special purposes' and 'special languages'. On one hand, they consider the notion of 'special language' as a restricted repertoire of words or expressions selected from the whole language to serve the requirements of a given context, task or vocation. On the other hand, 'special purpose' refers to the aim or the purpose for which the learners need a language. Hence, the notion 'special' in ESP focuses on the needs for which learners learn English and not on the specific jargon or register they learn.

Hutchinson and Waters (1987) see ESP as an approach in which the content and the method are based on learners' reasons for learning. They claim that an ESP course is based on the question: why does this learner need to learn a foreign language? To answer this question, data about learners, the language required and the learning context should be gathered. On the basis

of these data, the language to be taught is determined. In fact, Hutchinson and Waters *op.cit* (18-19) try to define ESP by showing what ESP is not rather than by showing what ESP is. For them, ESP is far from being a 'specialized variety' of English or a repertoire of words and grammar destined to learners of a given specialty. Of course, there are some features that can be typical in a given context and which the learner is likely to meet in the target situation. ESP, then, "should properly be seen not as any particular language product but as an approach to language teaching which is directed by specific and apparent reasons for learning". (p.19)

Perren (1974) (as cited in Mackey and Mountford *op.cit*: 4) claims that the terms 'special language' and 'specialized aim' are used interchangeably even though they refer to different notions. However, Mackey and Mountford *ibid* note that the concept 'special language' can be seen as a restricted repertoire of words and expressions selected from the whole language that serve the needs of learners and cover the requirements within a defined context, task, or vocation. Whereas, a 'specialized aim' is not related to the nature of language learners learn, but rather it refers to the purpose for which these learners learn a language. Hence, the focus of the word 'special' in ESP is on the purpose for which learners learn English and not for the specific jargon or register they learn.

## **2. Factors Influencing ESP Teaching and Learning**

Many factors interfere in the implementation of ESP programmes, and hence influence the learning and the teaching of it. Although teachers may not have to design syllabuses themselves, it is important to be aware of the factors that affect the course they have to teach. Hutchinson et al *op.cit* suggest four types of factors that affect the ESP course to be designed. These are the role of English; resources and administrative constraints; the learner; and linguistic aspects.

### **2.1. The Role of English**

Exposure to the English language is of much significance for learners who want to learn it. ESP programmes, generally, vary according to students' exposure and familiarity with English in their community. In some communities, the role of English, where it is used as a medium of communication in business, government and education, is much more extensive than where it plays a restricted role as a medium providing access to science and technology.

The role of English may differ according to students' needs of English in their programmes. They may see the need for English if it is demonstrated that they need it to study other subjects in the curriculum. On the other hand, English may be seen as an additional subject in the curriculum.

### **2.2. Resources and Administrative Constraints**

The circumstances, in which teaching takes place, are of much importance in facilitating the teaching task. The size of classes, for instance, is of major importance. Large size classes make the use of certain language teaching materials and methods difficult. They also minimize the opportunities of teacher-student communication and use of the language. In addition, they

reduce the ability to check all students' written assignments and correct them in the classroom. The ease of access to materials and the availability of audio-visual aids also facilitate the teaching-learning process. The quantity of instruction is reflected by the amount of time given to the English course and whether the time available is to be spread out over a period of time or used intensively in a shortened period. Many learners show more interest to modules related to their speciality because of the amount of time devoted for them and neglect short-time given courses thinking that the less time given to these courses reflect their non-necessity.

### 2.3. The Learner

Even though, ESP learners may belong to the same language group, educational, and cultural background, they inevitably have different age; level; level of motivation; and attitudes to learning.

#### 2.3. 1. Age

In fact, many ESP learners are adults and know why they are learning English. They are goal-oriented people who do not want to learn English because they are interested in it, but because they need it as an instrument that will help them to reach their study and work goals. Knowles (1990) interprets adulthood in terms of maturity, ability to make appropriate judgements based on experience and autonomy. They develop their learning strategies that make language learning easier and faster.

#### 2.3. 2. Level

An ESP class may include multilevel learners, who may excel and be able to operate perfectly in their field in their own language but not in English. These learners might be exposed to different educational background and this reflects their different levels. Therefore, the teacher will have a single class in which there are very advanced learners as well as some who are unable even to write their names. Hence, the teaching task would be very difficult if not impossible.

#### 2. 3. 3. Motivation

Krashen and Terrell (1983:17) assert that "*All human beings can acquire additional languages, but they must have the desire or the need to acquire the language, and the opportunity to use the language they study for real communicative purposes.*" Roe (1977) suggests three levels of motivation to learn English. *Level one*, the highest level, when English is required to obtain a degree or a desirable job; *Level two*, to improve exam grades or influence positively career prospects; and *level three* where English could increase the student's status, be useful if he goes abroad, or widen his knowledge . This system of levels assumes *instrumental motivation* (where English is seen as a means to achieving some practical or professional purposes) to be more important to success than the *integrative motivation* (where the learner identifies with the social or cultural aspects of learning English).

### 2. 3. 4. Attitudes to Learning

A student's previous English learning experience may influence his attitude toward an ESP course. If the learning of English was not successful in the past, there may be a negative feeling toward continuing with something that was faced with failure. Besides, the idea of independent learning, presents problems to some students who lack a display of autonomy in learning. Many students believe that the teacher is the fount of all wisdom. They do not believe they can learn unless they are in a classroom with a teacher.

### 2. 3. 5. Linguistic Aspects

"The selection of the linguistic content of the language to be used for particular purposes depends on an adequate and appropriate description of the language characteristics of that which the learner is required to handle."  
Mackey and Mountford (op.cit: 08)

There are three questions to be answered in any ESP situation; what sort of English will the learner need? What is his purpose in learning? How specific is his need? These questions can be answered by looking at various aspects of the learning situation and the language to be learnt by the students. The learner, for instance, may need to be taught a certain vocabulary since each speciality has its own vocabulary.

## II. Methodology

### A. Choice of the Method

In order to explore the actual and immediate problems biology students are facing, we opt for the descriptive method. It will permit us to obtain the detailed data regarding the situation of English use in the Algerian biology department. Adding to this, it helps to explore students' and teachers' opinions about the introduction of an ESP course in the above mentioned department. An experimental study would be of no usefulness if we consider that nothing new would be tested and that we will only report and analyse conditions of the current situation.

### B. Population

To obtain information regarding the situation of ESP teaching / learning at the biology department at Bouira University, we will deal with two samples chosen from the following population:

#### 1. Teachers

These are teachers of ESP at the department of biology. In regard to their small number, sampling will be of no need. In fact, teachers are important informants in this study as they give their points of view as academicians on students' need for English.

## 2. Students

Third year students of the biology department (1/5 of the whole population) as it is difficult to work on the whole population.

### C. Data Collecting Tools

To answer the research questions, quantitative data from students' questionnaires as well as teachers' interviews will be collected.

- **The Questionnaire**

The questionnaire is used as the main source of data and seems to be the most appropriate tool for many considerations like the large number of the population under study, its guarantee of the respondents' anonymity, and the short period of time if compared to the interview.

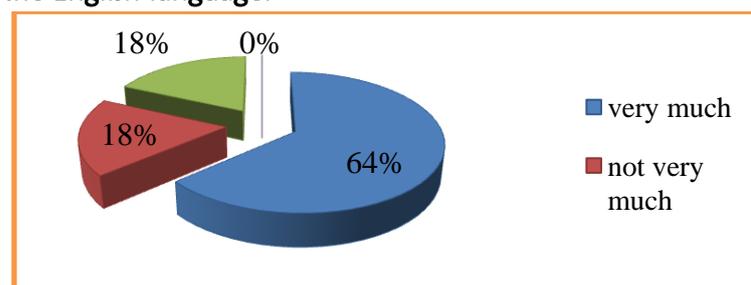
- **The Structured Interview**

The interview may be regarded as a more reliable instrument. It is designed for teachers of English. It is an adequate means since it allows personal explanations. Teachers would clarify the teaching conditions in the department of Biology. They would show the problems they face when teaching ESP. Hence, we might suggest some solutions.

## III. Results and Discussion

### A. Students' Questionnaire

#### 2. Do you like the English language?



*Figure 1: Learners' Attitudes towards the English Language*

The results show that the majority (63,64%) of students like English very much. It is obvious from the results that the majority holds positive attitudes towards the English language and this would be of a great importance for better achievement.

#### Q.3. as a biology student, how important is it for you to know English?

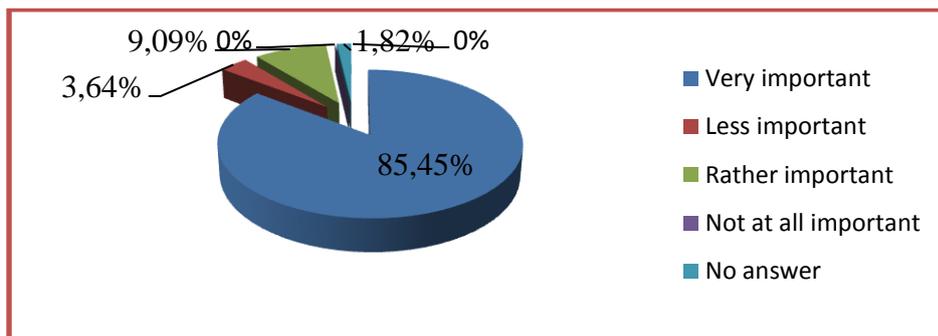


Figure 2: English Language Importance

This question aims at finding out whether or not students are aware of the role of English language in their field of specialty. The table shows that the majority (85,45%) think that English is very important especially in the scientific field nowadays.

**Q. 4. Please, justify your answer**

***Those who said English is very important:***

- It is the language of the world.
- It is the universal language.
- Important for my studies.
- Much of the scientific articles are written in English.
- Almost all the websites are in English.
- I love it.
- Important in post-graduation (research).

***Those who said English is less important:***

- It is less important since we use French in our studies.

By analysing these answers, we find out that learners are aware of the role English plays in their speciality. They consider it important because they know it is the language of the world and need it much more to read scientific articles written in English

**Q. 10. To what extent does the English course satisfy your needs in your field of study?**

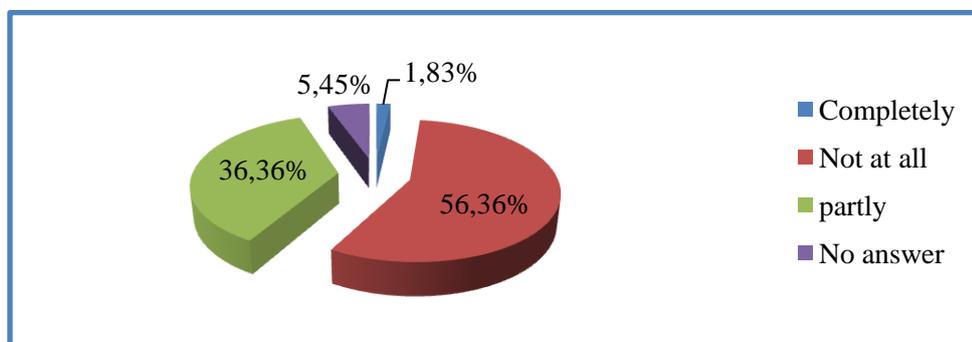


Figure 3: Students' opinions about the Course

According to the results shown in the above figure, we see that the majority of students (56,36%). feel that the English course does not satisfy their needs at all.

**Q.11. please, justify your answer**

*Students who replied with: completely*

No answer.

*Students who replied with: partly*

One session is not enough.

It is a course in grammar only (tenses only).

It is just initiation to English.

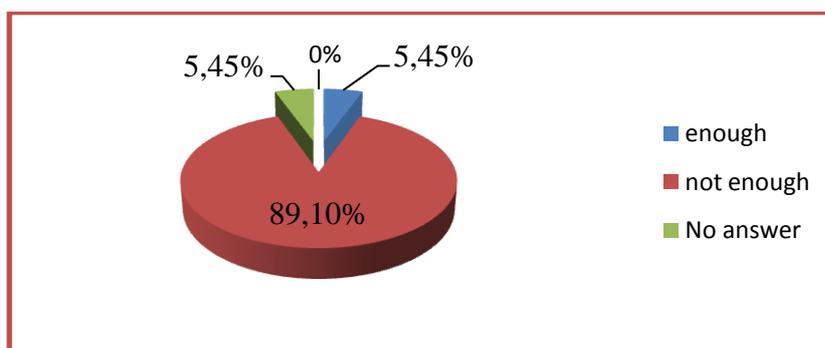
Short time (1h30mn).

*Students who replied with: not at all*

Time is not enough.

In addition to that the course presented is in the form of grammatical rules; it seems that the other students agree on the point that the time devoted to ESP is not sufficient.

**12. Do you think that the time allocated to the English course is**



*Figure 4: Students' opinions about the English Learning Period*

Figure 4 indicates clearly that a large proportion (89,10%) of the sample think that the time provided for English learning is not sufficient

## **B. Teachers' Interview**

**Q. 4. Have you had any specific training in teaching ESP?**

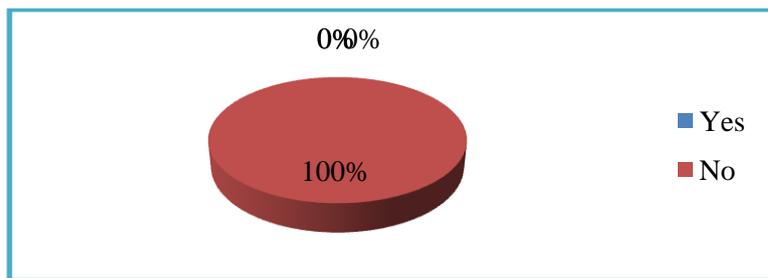


Figure 5: Teachers' Previous ESP Training

All the teachers said that they did not have any ESP training. This raises the point that ESP teaching may not have been taken seriously in the Biology department. The majority of these teachers is holders of Bachelor degree and is not well equipped in terms of training to teach ESP to biology students and achieve the required results. This leads us to think about teachers' training as one of the major problems of ESP teaching/learning.

**Q. 6. Do you think that the time devoted to ESP teaching/learning at the Biology department is sufficient to cover students' needs for English?**

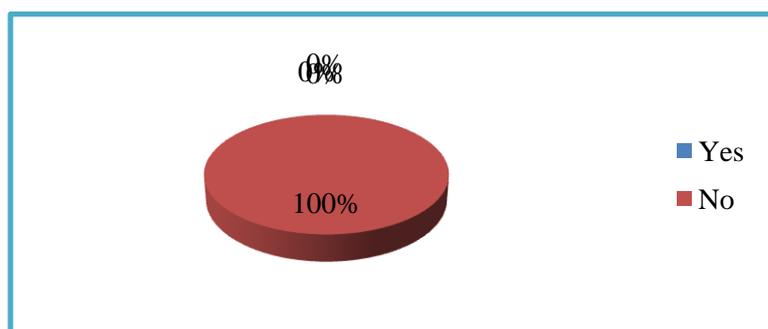


Figure 6: Time Allocation and Students' Needs

All the respondents (100%) to this question see that the time provided for ESP is not sufficient. This is compatible with students' answer for the same question where the majority (89, 10%) said that the time allocated to the ESP course is not enough to cover their needs.

**Q. 8. Do you have any special materials designed for biology students?**

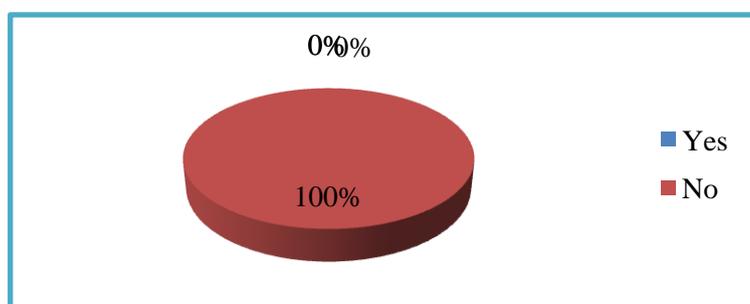
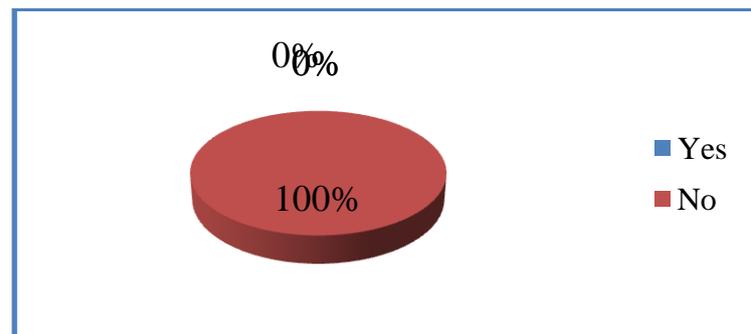


Figure 7: Materials Designed for Students

This question investigates whether any materials designed for Biology students are available. All the teachers (100%) say they do not have such materials. This may push them to teach with materials they choose and prepare themselves. The problem is that, how such teachers who lack knowledge as far as ESP teaching is concerned and are not aware of Biology students' requirements can prepare and propose such materials. Designing such materials requires research and analysis on students' needs and lacks.

**Q. 11. Do you meet teachers of the Biology department to discuss your course according to the programme of specialty?**



*Figure 8: Collaboration with Biology Teachers*

The 'yes- option' has been completely avoided. Consequently, there is no co-operation at all between the language teachers and the subject biology teachers either to discuss or comment the language courses in agreement with the whole programme of specialty.

After the tabulations have been commented, it seems that a certain number of problems have emerged. In fact, the results have reinforced most of our hypotheses concerning such a case of ESP teaching/learning; that is; many aspects have not been taken into great consideration:

**-Lacks in the Language Teacher's Profile:** the profile of the ESP teacher encountered has been one of the main causes of unsuccessful achievement among biology students. It may be due to the fact that most of the teachers lack knowledge concerning ESP teaching/learning, i.e., they are not trained to deal with such a case of teaching. Hence, they would take into consideration students' needs as a basis for the course.

**-Shortage of Time:** time allocation has proved to be another significant factor standing against a better achievement. In fact, the more time provided to teach a course, the better the learner is encountered with the language. However, it has been noticed that the time devoted to the English course is not sufficient to grasp the needed level and results. Even more, this influenced students' interest in the module.

**-Lack of materials:** the results have shown that teachers use materials they chose themselves and think are adequate for the learners. The lack of a course is a significant problem that teachers encounter when faced with learners of a given specialty. Providing a course or a

material requires a needs analysis to be conducted. This latter is based on learners needs for the language.

**-Lack of collaboration:** the method of team-teaching can be helpful to the language teacher who generally knows little or nothing about the subject matter by referring to the scientific competence of biology teachers. On the other side, subject specialists can ask language teachers to solve language problems of their students especially when they use scientific documentation and authentic texts written in English. However no collaboration between these teachers has been observed in this department.

#### IV. Implications

The subject of the present paper is an overview of main problems connected with teaching ESP at the university level with special emphasis on the Biology department at the University of Bouira. Nowadays, it is still urgent to discuss what to teach and how to teach a foreign language taking into account the objective academic and professional needs of our learners. Our analysis of the ESP teaching/learning problems in the Biology department has led to many suggestions for better achievement if they are taken into account. In fact, it is vital to work on preparing courses that would fulfil learners' needs and serve their requirements in the field of study. In addition, this study is considered as a stepping stone towards changing institutions attitudes toward English. This would be achieved through implementing the English course every year and provide more time allocation. Teachers of the speciality are also required to collaborate with the language teacher for better achievement.

#### Conclusion

Our country promotes foreign language learning, especially English language learning to interact effectively with other countries in domains of trade and international commerce, and to have abreast with the scientific development. It seems that our students are aware of such role English plays and are eager to improve their level as English learners.

In the same line of thought, The Algerian biologists need the English language to reinforce their position in the international scientific network; they are required to read scientific texts and articles, to keep in touch with foreign colleagues, and to attend international conferences. The fulfillment of these tasks is realized only through the mastery of the English language. Despite this fact, English instruction is not given its share of attention in the Department of Biology at the University of Bouira

## Appendices

### Appendix I: Students' Questionnaire

1- Gender

Male   
Female

2- Do you like the English language?

Very much                       Not very much   
Rather like it                       Not at all

3- As biology student, how important is it for you to know English?

Very important                       Less important   
Rather important                       Not at all important

4- Please, justify your answer.

.....

5- Are you interested in learning English outside the university?

Yes                       No

6- If yes, please explain how.

.....

7- Do you use documents written in English?

Yes                       No

8- If yes, to what extent do you use them?

Very much                       a little bit

9- Indicate the relative importance of each skill to you in your Biology studies ( 1= most to 4= least)

Reading	
Speaking	
Listening	
Writing	

10- To what extent does the English course satisfy your needs in your field of study?

Completely                       Partly                       Not at all

11- Please, justify your answer.

.....

12- Do you think that the time allocated to the English course is

Enough  Not enough

13- The English teacher's background is more literary than scientific (i.e., some times the teacher is not familiar with some specific topics and vocabulary of your speciality)

Yes  No

14- Who do you think would best meet your needs in ESP?

The English language specialist

The Biology teacher

A language specialist in scientific English

15- Please, justify your answer.

.....

16- Do you have any further suggestions for making the English course more effective and useful to you as a Biology student?

### Appendix II: Teachers' Interview

1- Gender

- Male   
 Female

2- What qualifications (academic) do you hold?

.....

3- How long have you been teaching English at the Biology department?

.....

4- Have you had any specific training in teaching ESP?

- Yes  No

5- If yes, please specify.

.....

6- Do you think that the time devoted to ESP teaching/learning at the Biology department is sufficient to cover students' needs for English?

- Yes  No

7- Please, justify your answer.

.....

8- Do you have any special materials designed for biology students?

- Yes  No

9- If no, where do you get materials from, do you use materials you prepare yourself?

.....

10- Which of the following skills do you tend to lay more attention? ( classify in order of emphasis going from 1 for the most important to 4 for the less important)

Reading	
Speaking	
Listening	
Writing	

11- Do you meet teachers of the Biology institute to discuss your course according to the programme of specialty?

- Yes  No

12- Have you any suggestions for making the English course more effective and more relevant to the students' needs in their field of study?

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