# Formative Assessment to Enhance Language Proficiency of Algerian ESP Learners
*Case of 3rd Year University Medicine Students*

# Évaluation Formative pour Améliorer les Compétences Linguistiques des Apprenants Algériens en ESP
*Cas des Etudiants Universitaires de 3ème Année Médecine*

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**Abstract:** The present research study explores the efficiency of formative assessment in improving English language proficiency among medicine students. The research is quasi-experimental research that uses a mixed-method approach, combining quantitative and qualitative data analysis. Results show that formative assessment strategies, such as tests, self-reflection activities, feedback sessions, self and peer assessment, portfolios assessments and some written assignments helped in improving medicine students' language proficiency and thus, positively impacted their academic achievement. Factors contributing to successful learning included highlighted learning objectives, encouraging learning atmosphere, efficient feedback systems, and alignment with medical field needs. Formative assessment optimizes language proficiency in ESP classrooms for medicine students.

*Keywords: formative assessment, English for Specific Purposes, language proficiency.*

**Résumé :** La présente étude de recherche explore l'efficacité de l'évaluation formative pour améliorer la maîtrise de l'anglais chez les étudiants en médecine. La recherche est quasi-expérimentale utilisant une approche mixte, combinant l'analyse des données quantitatives et qualitatives. Les résultats montrent que les techniques d'évaluation formative, telles que les tests, les activités d'autoréflexion, les séances de rétroaction et l'auto évaluation et l'évaluation par les pairs, et l'évaluation de portfolios

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ont contribué à améliorer les compétences linguistiques des étudiants en médecine et ont ainsi eu un impact positif sur leur réussite scolaire. Les facteurs contribuant à un apprentissage réussi comprenaient des objectifs d'apprentissage clairs, une atmosphère d'apprentissage favorable, des systèmes de rétroaction efficaces et un alignement avec les exigences de la pratique médicale. L'évaluation formative optimise les compétences linguistiques dans les classes ESP pour les étudiants en médecine.

**Mots-clés :** *évaluation formative, Anglais à des fins spécifiques, maîtrise de la langue.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

English for Specific Purposes (ESP) is an important area of English language teaching trends which from the late 1960's started to equip specific learners of different disciplines with the required knowledge of the English language needed in their specific domains (Dudley Evans and St Johns, 1998) i.e. to help them fulfill their academic studies or work duties. In the realm of medicine, which stands as a crucial domain within English for Science and Technology (EST), the foremost branch of English for Specific Purposes (ESP), the cultivation of English proficiency holds profound importance for aspiring doctors and healthcare practitioners. This proficiency enables them to navigate the scientific/authentic literature, engage in effective communication with diverse patients, colleagues, and researchers worldwide, participate in various medical events, and produce precise medical documents and reports. Nonetheless, the idea of guaranteeing a successful English language proficiency process among medicine students may constitute a real dilemma for ESP practitioners, who find themselves facing different challenging problems related mainly to, the adequate assessment ways and techniques which often fail to ensure continuous feedback of the ongoing learning. Because, the integration of the newly formative assessment strategies in ESP environments started to gain ascendency among the different ESP practitioners and researchers who view it as an auspicious approach to maintain timely and targeted feedback for continuous development of learners' proficiency, the major aim behind conducting the present research, is to explore the efficiency of formative assessment in improving English language proficiency among medicine students. To meet this end, a mixed-method approach to data analysis was opted for. The quantitative and qualitative data analysis will permit a carful investigation about the efficiency of formative assessment strategies such as; the continuous tests, self and peer assessment, reflective exercises and regular feedback sessions. Thus, the present study's objectives are threefold, first to shed light on the ESP teaching in the medicine field, second to explore the impact of

formative assessment on medicine students' language proficiency gained and third to investigate the efficiency of the formative assessment strategies on the ongoing learning process of medicine students. The research findings will provide ESP practitioners, researchers as well as decision makers with worthy perception about the ESP environment in general and in the medical field in particular. The results will also, contribute to enrich the literature about the ESP trend and the efficiency of the formative assessment techniques and strategies in ensuring language proficiency gained among medicine learners. The present study tries to answer the following research question

- How does the implementation of formative assessment strategies in ESP classrooms impact medicine students' language proficiency?

The already pre-set question engenders the hypothesis below
- Medicine students exposed to formative assessment practices will manifest higher academic achievement levels compared to those who are not.

## 2. Review of the Literature and Scope of the Research
### 2.1 Assessment in ESP Environments

Assessment in English for Specific Purposes (ESP) environments plays a crucial role in evaluating students' language proficiency, understanding their specific needs, and measuring their achievement in relation to the targeted professional discipline. Unlike general English language assessments, ESP assessments are designed to align with the specific language requirements and communicative tasks encountered in a particular field or domain. It is therefore, often viewed as the process of gathering data about the learning environment in general followed by making decisions to improve the teaching and learning experiences based on the obtained information, it enables teachers to check students' academic progress and the attainment of educational previously set objectives (Benguerfi and Boumediene, 2018). In this respect, ESP practitioners tend to conduct assessment procedures to diagnose learners' performance, identify their needs, make attempts to facilitate their learning and provide opportunities to raise the quality of their learning.

Hence, the idea of assessing specific English use among specific learners with special learning needs, such as the healthcare professionals, architects, engineers and other specific disciplines is concerned with the acquisition of specific points of the language that aligns with their respective fields of study and work environments. Thus, ESP assessment is defined as "tests which attempt to

measure language ability for specific vocational, professional and academic purposes". Douglas (2000.p, 8)

Despite the existence of a variety of types of assessment in ESP, the summative assessment is the assessment approach usually, opted for mainly because ESP practitioners give much importance to ensure learning objectives than checking ongoing feedback of the target situation.(Dudley Evans & St John,1998)

## 2.2 Formative Assessment

Formative assessment is a valuable, continuous and cyclical process that occurs throughout instruction. It enables teachers to regularly check their students' gained language learning and ensure content comprehension. In other words, it allows teachers to regularly point their students' strengths areas of the language covered as well as the weaknesses. These significant insights enable teachers to proceed to the required adjustments and/or plan modified or future units accordingly. (Bachman&Palmer, 1996).

In the same ligne of thought, Nitko (1993) offers two main purposes of formative assessment :(a) selecting or modifying learning procedures, and (b) choose the best remedies for improving the weak points in learning and teaching. The point is that, the implementation of formative assessment enables both the practitioners to bring necessary modifications and changes aligned with the regular feedback from the ongoing process and equip target learners with valuable instrumentation to check their improvements as well as their lacks.

## 2.3 Formative Assessment Strategies

Five formative assessment strategies were expressed as early as 2005; they are listed as follows

- *Clarifying, understanding, and sharing learning intentions Engineering effective classroom discussions, tasks and activities that elicit evidence of learning*
- *Providing feedback that moves learners forward*
- *Activating students as learning resources for one another*
- *Activating students as owners of their own learning.*( Leahy, Lyon, Thompson and Wiliam,2005).

They include various assessment methods such as diagnostic tests, self-assessment, peer-assessment, portfolios, and assessments. Each of the already set technique serves a highlighted objective in assessing learners' language

skills, indicating areas of development and progress, and enhancing autonomous learning.

- Tests are often used at the beginning of any ESP instruction to assess students' initial prior background knowledge of the language and point existing areas of lacks that constitute a challenge for the target learners. The obtained information helped a great dealto customize the course content and develop learning activities that address the specific needs of the learners.

- Self-assessment and peer-assessment are significant techniques that help learners to improve and develop autonomy and ensure their direct engagement in the assessment process. Self-assessment motivates and includes the learners in monitoring their own progress. Peer-assessment, on the other hand, allows learners to provide feedback on their peers' realization and failure and thus, fostering collaboration and enhancing their own understanding of the language requirements within their specific disciplines.

- Portfolios and written assessments are implemented in ESP environments to check learners' ability to apply their gained knowledge of the language in real contexts. Portfolios provide a collection of students' work examples; denote language proficiency and capacities to produce context-specific language. (Coombe et al., 2007.p, 24).

- Feedback sessions provide the ESP instruction with valuable data from the ongoing learning process, it helps in maintain timely and targeted information about the learning instruction taking place, this will help both teachers and learners in regularly pointing what the learners are succeeding in and the challenges they encounter.

- Self-reflective activities help learners to put their cognitive skills in practice and assimilate language rubrics to the requirement of their specific area of study, it also helps in building confidence and autonomy of the learner.

Assessment in ESP environments should not only focus on investigating language proficiency gained but also, emphasize students' ability to use language effectively in their intended academic and/or professional fields. What is worth mentioning is that, the integration of different formative assessment strategies will help ESP practitioners with insightful feedback about the ongoing process of learning, promote learner autonomy, and ensure effectiveness of the instruction practice along with their field and improve learners' achievement.

## 2.4 Significance of Formative Assessment

Several research works demonstrated the value of formative assessment in educational environment and the crucial role it plays for students 'proficiency gained. According to (Heritage et al. 2009; Popham 2008, Black and William 1998, Shepard 2000) formative assessment is useful for learning improvement; it is one of the most important interventions for promoting high performance and proficiency. Thus, many educational decision makers call for the implementation of formative assessment in the classroom for its beneficial aspects for the teaching/learning process in general and for the teachers and students respectively.

## 2.5 Challenges and Issues Related to Formative Assessment

Though formative assessment is acknowledged as an effective assessment approach impacting positively on the proficiency gained by the learners especially in an ESP environment, some issues and challenges are related to the formative assessment implementation (Genesee & Upsher, 1996), they include:

1. Validity and reliability: the validity and reliability ensure the obtaining of information of quality. However, both validity and reliability may constitute a real challenge. It is important to design assessments that ensure accuracy of learners' progress and provide authentic feedback.
2. Time constraints: because the whole ESP operation is subject to time constraints, it may be a real problem for ESP practitioners and instructors to manage dedicated time and resources for the continuous assessments needed by the formative assessment.
3. Classroom management: it is obvious that the size of the classroom matter in a formative assessment process. In effect, the implementation of formative assessment in a very large classroom may constitute difficulties for the teachers to manage individualized outcome from each student.
4. Fairness: if it is not conducted in a fair manner. Formative assessment may engender a bias assessment. Teachers need to be very attentive and aware of subjectivity so that, potential bias such as students' background or prior performance will be completely nullified.
5. Interpretation of data: adequate support and training to interpret findings from collected data may be challenging for teachers who need to use it most effectively and adequately to ensure good perception of the ongoing learning process.

## 3. Research Design, Methodology and Procedure

The present research is quasi-experimental research designed to investigate the impact of formative assessment on medicine students' proficiency and explore medicine students' achievement levels through formative assessment strategies compared to those who do not. To meet those ends, and to obtain the required data of the present research two groups of3rd year medicine students were selected; one being the experimental group, the second one the control group. The experimental group was receiving regular formative assessment activities throughout the first semester of the academic year (2018/ 2019).On the other hand;the control group: follows the traditional summative assessment approach. For the assessments: a pre- test and post-test were designed; what should be noted, is that the test is a comprehensive proficiency test that aligns with the ESP existing curriculum designed for medicine students at –Abu Bekr Belkaid university of Tlemcen- to assess students' initial proficiency level. A second test was administered at the end of the research to measure students' language proficiency improvement. A survey questionnaire was administered to collect medicine students' perceptions and experiences regarding formative assessment strategies, check their understanding of the effectiveness of formative assessment on their learning and know about their preferences for specific assessment strategies.

### 3.1Participants

The idea of selection of appropriate sample that fits ESP situation is far to be an easy task, because English is neither the main concern nor the most valued subject in the medicine department by both the teachers and the learners; this is not to underestimate the weigh English has in the scientific fields in general and for healthcare professionals in particular; it is mainly because the medicine subject matters are given priority as well as, higher portions in their yearly academic grade. It is worth to note that, the English subject has long constituted a big dilemma for medicine students because, they were completely deprived from English classes. Hopefully; a course that caters for their English language needs was recently implemented.  Hence; the selection of participants for this study followed a convenience sampling because the convenience sampling stands out as the most practical and widely utilized approach in clinical research. In this method, subjects are enrolled based on their availability and accessibility, making it a quick, cost-effective, and convenient option. The term "convenience sampling" aptly reflects the researcher's selection of sample elements based on their convenient accessibility and proximity. (Cohen et al., 2000)

Thus, drawing from the pool of 67 medicine students enrolled in the elective English course in the academic year 2018-2019.  the present study covers a sample of 25 third year medicine students (the students who are always present and available) regrouped in two main groups: from the 25 overall number of the participants 12 students constitute the number of students in the experimental group; the remaining 13 students constitute the size of control group students. What should be noted is that, the researcher is neither a part-time teacher nor a permanent one but, for the sake of the research; she was given access to the classes and collaboration with the part time English teacher was allowed.

It is worth mentioning that, the unique ESP teacher in the department of medicine did not accept to undertake an interview since, she asserts that, she is only a part-time teacher with no ESP teaching experience.  The insights of the ESP teacher would be beneficial for the research to gather insights and experiences regarding formative assessment strategies in facilitating medicine students 'learning and promoting their proficiency level.

### 3.2 Data Collection Instruments

For the sake of collecting the required data to fulfill the already set study objectives; a pre-test and a post-test were designed to assess medicine students' initial proficiency level, their existing knowledge as well as their weaknesses. A second test was administered at the end of the study to evaluate students' language proficiency improvement. Both experimental and control groups were tested to seek the efficiency of the formative assessment strategies and its impact on students' language proficiency gained compared with the group that does not benefit from the same strategies of assessment. The test was focusing on areas of the English language targeting the medical field. The survey questionnaire was addressed to the medicine students involved in the study to gather significant feedback about formative assessment strategies, and their effectiveness in their proficiency level improvement.

### 3.2.1 The Tests

The pre-test and the post-tests were divided into two parts: first part, pointed the vocabulary and medical terminology in which learners were asked to:
- Match medical terms with their definitions.
- Fill in the blanks with the appropriate medical terms.

- Multiple-choice questions testing understanding of medical terminology and accurate usage of medical terms.
- Understanding and correctly applying medical acronyms and abbreviations.
- Demonstrating a wide range of medical vocabulary relevant to the field.

Second part however, pointed grammar and syntax: students were asked to:
- Correct use of tenses and verb forms in medical contexts.
- Appropriate sentence structure and word order in medical writing.
- Consistent and accurate use of subject-verb agreement.

### 3.3 Data Analysis

In this section, we examine the analysis of pre-test and post-test data for both the control group and the experimental group. Initially, we present the findings from the pre-test for both groups, as well as the post-test results, allowing for a direct and straightforward comparison of the results obtained.

### 3.3.1 Pre-test Results

It should be noted that, the pre-test included two parts, vocabulary/terminology and grammar/syntax, each part was regrouping 20 multiple choice alternatives. (Questions or activities) where participants were asked to fill in the correct answer or form, the findings were as illustrated in the table below

**Table 01.**

*Pre-tests results from both experimental and control groups*

| Students | Vocabulary/terminology scores /20 | Grammar/syntax Scores /20 | Overall scores/40 |
|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | 10 | 8 | 18 |
| 2 | 13 | 5 | 18 |
| 3 | 15 | 6 | 21 |
| 4 | 00 | 4 | 13 |
| 5 | 11 | 10 | 21 |
| 6 | 14 | 11 | 25 |
| 7 | 19 | 13 | 32 |
| 8 | 10 | 10 | 20 |
| 9 | 7 | 6 | 13 |
| 10 | 3 | 3 | 6 |
| 11 | 14 | 10 | 24 |
| 12 | 5 | 3 | 8 |
| 13 | 7 | 5 | 12 |
| 14 | 6 | 1 | 7 |
| 15 | 15 | 7 | 22 |
| 16 | 11 | 8 | 19 |
| 17 | 13 | 1 | 14 |
| 18 | 9 | 00 | 9 |
| 19 | 10 | 10 | 20 |
| 20 | 15 | 11 | 26 |
| 21 | 7 | 7 | 15 |
| 22 | 12 | 10 | 22 |
| 23 | 11 | 10 | 21 |
| 24 | 4 | 4 | 8 |
| 25 | 7 | 2 | 9 |
| V≥10= 60% | Gr2≥10= 36% | OS3≥20 = 52% |
| V≥10= 40% | Gr≤10 = 64% | OS≤20 = 48% |

The pre-test scores of students in both groups, suggest that 52%of the participants achieved an average score. The scores indicate that students have an intermediate level of proficiency in vocabulary and medicine terminology. However, it is important to exercise caution when drawing conclusions based only on this data especially that 64% of the students show weaknesses in grammar and syntax rubrics. Obtaining individual scores for each student in both language rubrics would provide more reliable data and a clearer understanding of their proficiency levels. Thus, assessing medicine students' performance in both vocabulary and terminology as well as, grammar and syntax is noteworthy. The data revealed that, in the terminology part of the test, 60% of students exhibited sufficient understanding and knowledge of the medical jargon and a good understanding of medical terminology as well as, accurate usage of medical terms. However, this does not align with their proficiency level in grammar and syntax part of the test, as the average score indicates that only 36% of students performed well.

### 3.3.2 Post-tests Results

As the pre-test, the post-test was administered at the end of the semester, to check the language proficiency gained. It included two parts, vocabulary/terminology and grammar/syntax, each part was regrouping 20 multiple choice alternatives. The unique difference lied in the alternatives offered, i.e. in the post-test, no multiple choices were offered for the students, they were required to fill the correct answer alone. The findings will show the impact of formative assessment on medicine student's proficiency level gained as well as, their academic achievement.

**Table 02.**

*Post-tests results from the experimental group*

| Students | Vocabulary/terminology scores /20 | Grammar/syntax Scores /20 | Overall scores/40 |
|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | 10 | 8 | 18 |
| 2 | 13 | 5 | 18 |
| 3 | 15 | 6 | 21 |
| 4 | 00 | 4 | 13 |
| 5 | 11 | 10 | 21 |
| 6 | 14 | 11 | 25 |
| 7 | 19 | 13 | 32 |
| 8 | 10 | 10 | 20 |
| 9 | 7 | 6 | 13 |
| 10 | 3 | 3 | 6 |
| 11 | 14 | 10 | 24 |
| 12 | 5 | 3 | 8 |
| 13 | 7 | 5 | 12 |
| 14 | 6 | 1 | 7 |
| 15 | 15 | 7 | 22 |
| 16 | 11 | 8 | 19 |
| 17 | 13 | 1 | 14 |
| 18 | 9 | 00 | 9 |
| 19 | 10 | 10 | 20 |
| 20 | 15 | 11 | 26 |
| 21 | 7 | 7 | 15 |
| 22 | 12 | 10 | 22 |
| 23 | 11 | 10 | 21 |
| 24 | 4 | 4 | 8 |
| 25 | 7 | 2 | 9 |
| V≥10= 60% | | Gr2≥10=  36% | OS3≥20 = 52% |
| V≥10= 40% | | Gr≤10 = 64% | OS≤20 = 48% |

**Table 03.**

*post-tests results from the control group*

| Students | Vocabulary/terminology scores /20 | Grammar/syntax Scores /20 | Overall scores/40 |
|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | 12 | 10 | 22 |
| 2 | 13 | 9 | 22 |
| 3 | 17 | 7 | 24 |
| 4 | 7 | 8 | 15 |
| 5 | 14 | 11 | 25 |
| 6 | 17 | 15 | 32 |
| 7 | 17 | 13 | 30 |
| 8 | 10 | 10 | 20 |
| 9 | 10 | 9 | 19 |
| 10 | 7 | 10 | 17 |
| 11 | 14 | 14 | 28 |
| 12 | 9 | 8 | 17 |

**Test1 T2≥ 10 = 58,33%**
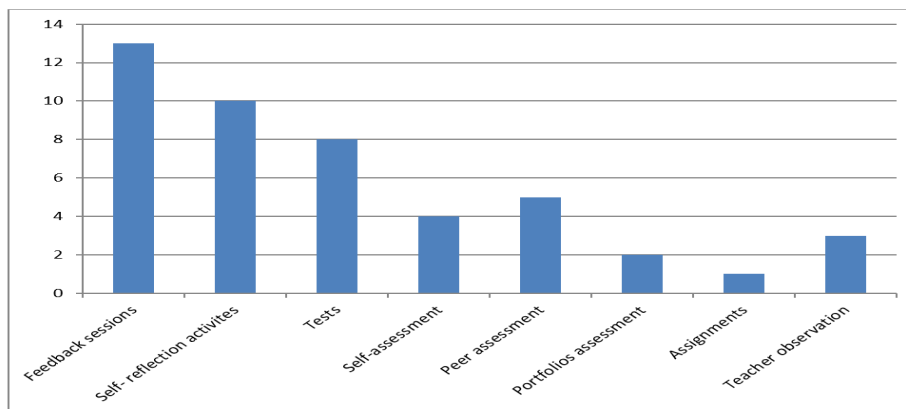**Test T2 < 10 = 41,67%**          **Test2 T2≥ 20 = 66,66%**
**Table 03.**
*post-tests results from the control group*

    The obtained results revealed clear improvements in language proficiency and achievement for the experimental group with 66,66% compared to 53,84% of the control group. Medicine students' language backgrounds has significantly shown to be far richer from the initial background knowledge they hadsince58,33% performed better in the grammar/syntax rubrics than36% determined by the pre-test. Hence, the experimental group scores are relatively showed more consistent than that of the control group. These findings are clearly demonstrated in both group scores

**3.3.3 The Results of the Survey Questionnaire**

**Figure 01**

*Formative assessment strategies'preferences among medicine students.*

The results of the survey questionnaire demonstrate a positive impact of formative assessment on learners' language proficiency. The surveyed students reported a significant improvement in their language proficiency as a result of formative assessment strategies. In effect, the whole experimental group 12 students reported that the feedback sessions helped them consolidate the acquired knowledge. 10 students agreed that the self-reflection activities were a useful area that helped them challenge their individual cognitive abilities which allow them to better perform, the regular tests permitted to point their strength as well as their weaknesses according to 08 students. As for both self and peer assessment strategies,09 students consider it as valuable opportunities to highlight both attained area of improvement and weaknesses. For the portfolios and written assignments, surveyed students show less interest and preference for those formative strategies since, only 03 students acknowledged their efficiency. The last formative assessment strategy used is the one of teachers' observation that, for 03 participants helped them in guiding their progress and in encouraging a better performance. The findings from the experimental group surveyed questionnaire indicate students' perception and preferences towards the formative assessment strategies and their impact on their proficiency gained shown in their ability to better use their language skills in various contexts.

## 4. Discussion of the Main Results

The investigation of formative assessment to enhance medicine students' proficiency has yielded promising findings. The selected data collection instruments represented in pre-test and post-test, along with the survey questionnaire for medicine students, brought significant insights into the impact of formative assessment in the ESP classrooms targeting the medicine field. The findings from the pre-test and post-test indicated significant improvement in the medicine students' language proficiency gained. The data revealed that target students' language backgrounds have significantly shown to be far richer from the initial background knowledge, the experimental group scores were relatively more consistent than that of the control group assessed traditionally via the summative techniques. Accordingly, formative assessment strategies targeted direct specific language needs. This proves the effectiveness of the formative assessment process in promoting language development among medical students. Furthermore, the findings collected from the survey questionnaire administered to medicine students provided valuable feedback about students' perceptions of formative assessment and its

impact on their academic achievement. The surveyed students perceived formative assessment as a valuable instrument which enhances their learning outcomes. They acknowledged the worth of the ongoing assessment and regular feedback in guiding their progress, motivating them to better perform and permitting them to actively engage in the learning process. This positively impacted their academic achievement, as it helped them monitor their own improvement and enabled them to bring necessary adjustments to their learning strategies. Those findings confirmed the hypothesis which suggested that medicine students exposed to formative assessment practices will manifest higher academic achievement levels compared to those who do not. These findings optimized the importance of integrating formative assessment approach and its strategies into ESP classrooms. The study suggests that formative assessment process not only brings useful insights about the language proficiency gained but also, facilitates language learning and offers a deeper understanding of the language rubrics needed in the medical discipline resulting in an overall better academic achievement.

## 5. Conclusion

To conclude, the integration of formative assessment in ESP classrooms for Algerian medicine students proved its effectiveness in promoting language proficiency. The study suggests that formative assessment process does not provide useful insights about the language proficiency gained solely but also, helps in facilitating language learning. The idea of ensuring ongoing process offers a deeper understanding of the language rubrics needed in the medical discipline resulting in an overall better academic achievement. The study posits valuable insights for ESP practitioners and researchers in the ESP field about the positive impact of the formative assessments' practices on target students' achievements; in that the use of tests, regular feedback sessions, self and peer assessments in addition to teachers' observations helps medicine students to consolidate their gained knowledge and provides them with opportunities to point their areas of strengths and their weaknesses. The study contributes to the enrichment of the ESP field literature more precisely, in the assessment part of the teaching which presents alternatives to archaic summative assessment strategies often failing to ensure continuous feedback of the learning process. Other research may use both formative and summative assessment to ensure learning outcomes and feedback about medicine learners' proficiency level in which a larger sample maybe used as for the time of the investigation period, another limitation of this research is that of the

integration of teachers' insights into the investigation, as mentioned before the unique ESP teacher in the department of medicine did not accept to take part in the investigation because of her poor ESP teaching experience.

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