

## **ESP Instruction in Morocco: A Study of University Students' Attitudes and Perceptions**

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### **Abstract**

*Language attitude is one of the key factors in foreign language development. In this regard, a plethora of studies has recently provided evidence suggesting that Moroccan students adopt positive attitudes towards learning English as a foreign language for general purposes. These studies focused on students belonging to different streams of study and from different educational levels. However, very few studies have attempted to explore university students' attitudes toward learning English for specific purposes. Therefore, the present article tries to understand better the status of English for specific purposes in Morocco from different perspectives. It investigates the Moroccan ESP university students' attitudes toward learning English and attempts to explain the motives behind these attitudes. To meet this end, 125 respondents belonging to various disciplines and from four different Moroccan higher educational institutions completed a survey about the use of English inside and outside school, the importance of this language, and whether these attitudes are driven by instrumental or integrative reasons. Findings revealed that Moroccan ESP university students have positive attitudes towards learning English for specific purposes and want to use it for both instrumental and integrative reasons. In light of these findings, a number of implications are offered.*

*Keywords: Attitudes, ESP, Morocco, motivation, university students*

## **1. INTRODUCTION**

English for specific purposes (ESP) is one of the most established teaching approaches in English language teaching (ELT). It is defined as an approach to language teaching that targets learners' academic or occupational needs (Anthony, 2018; Richards & Rodgers, 2014). The main concern of ESP is to offer learners support and guidance so that they can successfully fulfill their specific learning objectives. In this regard, Hutchinson and Waters (1987) clearly point out that ESP is not just a matter of teaching specialized jargon like science words for scientists or hotel words for hotel staff and so on. As a matter of fact, ESP is "an eclectic approach that takes the most useful, successful, and valid ideas from other theories and practices, combining them into a consistent whole" (Anthony, 2018).

In Moroccan public schools, English is taught as a foreign language in the last year of middle school and the three years of high school. In recent years, English has been implemented in primary private schools as well. It is also used as a medium of instruction in the departments of English in all Moroccan universities. Besides, English is taught as a compulsory subject in some higher education institutions of business, agriculture engineering, industrial engineering, and architecture. The majority of Moroccan learners tend to have a preference for the English language (Amrous, 2020; Belhiah, 2020). This opinion is believed to be mainly based on social factors (Getie, 2020) as well as "personal intuitions, political or ethnic orientations" (Bouziane, 2020, p. 297). Thus, this article aims to bring students' voices to the front, with a particular focus on Moroccan university ESP students.

Attitudes can guide behavior in the sense that they may trigger positive or negative actions toward an object (Baker, 1992). In recent years, one of the important target objects that received special consideration in research in language learning. As a matter of fact, learners' attitudes towards learning a particular language, which is formed from essential beliefs and views about different factors, can directly influence their language learning development (Victori & Lockhart, 1995). According to Walker et al. (2013), "attitude" refers to emotions and feelings associated with previous experiences. In other words, attitudes can be understood to be mediated reactions that have been fundamentally shaped by the surrounding social context. Therefore, it is believed that language learners' perceptions regarding their environment influence their attitudes toward learning the target language.

In this regard, Brown (2000) states that students need to identify their second/foreign language internal problems in order to control or even overcome them. Hence, according to Dörnyei (2003), focusing on external factors that are associated only with the teacher and teaching methods can be insufficient and less effective in enhancing their second/foreign language development. Instead, special attention should also be devoted to understand learners' attitudes towards the target language, the instrumental benefits they associate with learning it, their motivation to invest an effort in learning this language, and their motives/objectives to learn it.

In addition to this, it is worth noting that learning a second/foreign language is different from first language acquisition because it involves learning both linguistic and cultural aspects which differ from that of the native speaker. Still more, in the context of learning English for specific purposes, non-native students are required to invest

considerable effort. ESP learners need to acquire not only a general English communicative competence and learn about the culture of the speaking country but also to develop certain skills and use comprehensible and technical jargon that is specifically related to their field of specialty and future jobs. This, in turn, implies that investigating non-majored English students' attitudes towards learning English for specific purposes can bear fruitful results with the view of ensuring effective ESP teaching and learning.

It, therefore, follows that in order to achieve successful and effective language learning, affective factors are tremendously important. Attitude, in particular, is a vital affective factor in foreign or second language learning. It is a psychological construct that explains why certain students learn more efficiently than others. Research on second/foreign language teaching and learning show that students with positive attitudes perform better than other learners (see, for example, Al-Qahtani, 2013; Brown, 2007; Colaste, 2018; Nyamubi, 2016; Petrides, 2006; Zhao, 2015). Favorable attitudes toward the target language and its community can increase students' interest, boost their motivation, and, as a result, improve their language learning performance (Ellis, 2015; Ortega, 2014). Likewise, students with negative attitudes have high levels of learning anxiety which, in turn, result in slow, poor, or no learning (Verma, 2005, p. 9).

In addition to this, it is noted that studies on university students' attitudes toward learning English for specific purposes are really lacking in the Moroccan context. Most of the previous literature focused on investigating learners' attitudes toward learning English as a foreign language (Amrous, 2020; Belhiah, 2020; Ben Hammou & Kesbi, 2022; Bouziane, 2020). This is undeniably fruitful in refining the quality of ELT and optimizing students' performance outcomes. However, ESP students' attitudes also need to be taken into account. Therefore, the present study aims to contribute to this line of research by investigating Moroccan university students' attitudes toward learning English for specific purposes. It also attempts to explain the factors behind these attitudes. More specifically, the present study aims to answer the following research questions:

1. What attitudes do Moroccan university students hold towards learning ESP?
2. What factors nurture such attitudes?

The article is structured as follows. First, it provides a review of the previous literature on attitudes and language learning as well as studies on students' attitudes towards ESP learning both worldwide and in the Moroccan context. Next, a detailed account of the methodological procedures followed in the present study is offered, including the research approach, the research design, the participants, the data collection tools, and the data analysis procedures. Later, the results are presented and discussed in light of the previous literature. Finally, the study concludes by highlighting a set of implications at different levels.

## **2. LITERATURE REVIEW**

Departing from the assumption that attitude can significantly impact English language learning in general (Gardner, 2000; Karahan, 2007; Tahaine & Daana, 2013), and ESP performance in particular (Loan, 2017; Martinović & Poljaković, 2010), Alharbi (2022) explored Saudi health care students' attitudes towards learning English for specific purposes. To meet this end, the researcher administered a questionnaire to 57 students of the

preparatory year program (PYP) in the College of Applied Health Sciences and interviewed 25 of them. Findings showed that most participants have positive attitudes towards learning English and discovering the target culture. These attitudes are motivated by good-quality teaching and a relaxing learning environment. The researcher further emphasized the tremendous importance of taking into account students' attitudes and interests while designing ESP curricula, preparing courses, and delivering lectures.

Otanjac (2021) also examined students' attitudes toward their ESP course as well as the teaching materials. The participants of this study were 75 first and second-year students at the faculty of special education and rehabilitation, the university of Belgrade in Serbia. An online questionnaire was used to collect data. Findings revealed that the majority of the participants have positive attitudes towards their ESP course and are satisfied with the teaching materials as well. In a similar vein, Bouhafs & Boughari (2017) explored the attitudes of 30 first-year biology master students at Tlemcen university towards their ESP classes. Through the means of a questionnaire, findings showed that "the majority of Biology students are motivated to learn English and aware of the necessity of their ESP courses" (p. 5).

A survey by Martinović and Poljaković (2010) on attitudes towards ESP among university students has produced similar results. In the study, the researchers used a questionnaire to examine 149 first-year ESP university students' attitudes toward the teacher and the evaluation method(s) as well as towards learning English. Findings indicated that students generally have positive attitudes towards the teacher and learning English. Most of the participants are aware of the tremendous importance and usefulness of learning English in their future careers. Martinović and Poljaković (2010) further stressed that students with positive attitudes achieved higher grade levels in comparison to students with negative attitudes. In light of these results, the researchers emphasized that students' attitudes towards the teacher, the teaching methodology, and the target language correlate with motivation and willingness to learn a language.

Contrary to the previous studies, Anwar (2017) conducted a study in Rajshahi university of engineering (RUET) in Bangladesh. More specifically, the researcher used a questionnaire to elicit the attitudes of 40 first-semester ESP students toward their English language courses. The study's findings provided evidence that most of the participants had negative attitudes. They were not interested in the content of their ESP courses and therefore lost their motivation for learning English. Similarly, Arslan and Akbarov (2012) examined university students' perceptions of learning English for specific purposes. The researchers elicited the attitudes of 100 ESP students by administering a questionnaire. Despite the participants' awareness of the importance of English for their future jobs, findings revealed that most of them have negative attitudes towards learning this language because they perceive "their field courses as more important" (p. 29).

Along the same line, Alqahtani (2015) investigated 116 Saudi engineering students' attitudes toward learning English for specific purposes. To that end, a questionnaire was used as the main data collection instrument. Interviews were also carried out with the view of identifying practical recommendations and suggestions. Findings showed that most of the students have negative attitudes towards learning English, mainly due to "poor English

background, fear of grammatical mistakes, and lack of confidence” (p. 93). Therefore, the researcher highlights the need for advanced instructional methods in order to motivate students and boost their interest in learning ESP.

In the Moroccan context, Research on attitudes toward learning languages is not a new area of investigation. Elyazale (2019) is one of the researchers who investigated the attitudes of students who do not major in English toward learning ESP. To that end, a questionnaire was used to elicit the attitudes of 244 first-year master economy students at the faculty of economics and law in Meknes. Findings revealed that most of the participants hold positive attitudes towards learning English for specific purposes. El Kandoussi (2019), to cite another example, examined students' attitudes toward learning ESP in vocational schools. More specifically, the participants of this study were 108 first year students from l'Ecole supérieure de Technologie of Meknes (ESTM). Through the means of a questionnaire, findings showed that most students have positive attitudes toward learning English. This was largely attributed to the benefits that ESP students associate with learning this language. The majority of the participants were aware that English would help them cope with the recent developments in business, commerce, science, and technology.

The upshot of this review is the scarcity of studies that explore Moroccan university ESP students' attitudes toward learning English. In fact, most of the published literature has focused on needs analysis in ESP instruction (Ait Hattani, 2019; Akhajam & Elkarfa, 2012; Dahbi, 2016; El Kandoussi, 2017; Mahraj, 2019) or ICT implementation in ESP courses (Boutahar, 2020; Dkhissi, 2014; El Messaoudi, 2021; Bourzgui et al., 2021; Zakhir, 2018). However, none of the reported studies has investigated students' attitudes toward learning English for specific purposes. Therefore, the present article tries to fill this gap by exploring the attitudes of ESP university students toward learning English for specific purposes.

### **3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

The purpose of this study is to build upon emerging research on Moroccan students' attitudes toward learning foreign languages. In particular, this study is concerned with eliciting university students' attitudes towards learning English for specific purposes as well as the motives that nurture such attitudes (instrumental or integrative reasons). A further focus is on students' motivation to learn ESP. The main objective behind this focus is to shed light on a distinct English language teaching approach, namely ESP instruction, in Moroccan higher education institutions and refine the quality of this practice. Therefore, as befits the objectives of the current research, a quantitative approach was used since “quantitative findings are likely to be generalized to a whole population or a sub-population because it involves the larger sample which is randomly selected” (Rahman, 2017, p. 106).

#### **3.1. Research Design**

The objective of this study is to elicit university ESP students' attitudes toward learning English for specific purposes. It also aims at revealing the different factors that nurture such attitudes. In this way, the main variables investigated are students' attitudes toward learning ESP. To pursue this aim, the present empirical study relies on a survey research strategy. A number of reasons motivated the choice of this research design. Survey research provides “a quantitative or numeric description of trends, attitudes, or opinions of a

population by studying a sample of that population” (Creswell, 2009, p. 234). First, it helps researchers gather a large amount of information in a short time (Dörnyei, 2007). Second, survey designs have the advantage of being easily developed and administered to the target population. Third, they are reliable and quantifiable. This, in turn, explicates the reason why this research design has been widely adopted in research on attitudes.

### 3.2. Participants

The context of the current research is Moroccan higher education institutions in different cities, namely Meknes, El Jadida, and Casablanca. ESP university students constitute the sample of the study. As participation was voluntary, the present study utilized a voluntary response sampling technique to recruit participants. More specifically, the participants included 125 ESP third-year university students. An effort was made to collect data from higher education institutions of different specialties. The final number included 92 females and 33 males (74% and 26%, respectively), while their ages ranged between 20 and 22 years old.

The students in this study studied two languages, namely Arabic and French. Almost 91.2% of the participants have been studying English for at least four years, while only 8.8.% learned English in a private institute or in an English language center. In their third year of tertiary education, they study English as a mandatory subject, although their major is different. Also, the participants belonged to different streams of study: agriculture engineering from ENAM (National School of Agriculture in Meknes), business from ENCG (National School of Commerce and Management), industrial engineering from ENSA (National School of Applied Sciences), and medicine from FMP (Faculty of Medicine and Pharmacy). A brief overview of the setting and participants is offered in the following table.

*Table 1: Overview of the setting and participants*

School	Number of boys	Number of girls	Total number of students
ENAM	26	66	<b>92</b>
ENCG	4	15	<b>19</b>
ENSA	3	5	<b>8</b>
FMP	0	6	<b>6</b>
<b>Total number of students</b>	<b>33</b>	<b>92</b>	<b>125</b>

### 3.3.Data Collection Tools

The questionnaire has always been used as the main data collection instrument in attitudinal research. Ianos (2014, p. 134) supports this claim by stating that the questionnaire is the most appropriate tool for investigating attitudes toward language learning. The choice of a questionnaire derives from its considerable benefits. First, it is time-saving as it can be administered to a large number of the target population in a short period of time. Second, a questionnaire is anonymous, considering that the participants are not asked to reveal their identities and write their names. This, in turn, usually encourages respondents to express

their opinions more freely. Third, using a questionnaire offers participants ample time to think rationally about their answers since they do not have to fill it out immediately. Finally, a questionnaire is considered an objective data collection tool because the researcher's influence is not strong in comparison to other instruments such as interviews or classroom observation.

In the current study, a four-point Likert scale questionnaire was used to collect data. It was constructed on the basis of previous research studies (Bouziane, 2020, Kaplan, 1993; Watson, 1995) and comprised two main parts. The first section was related to the participant's demographic information, including gender, age, school, and level. Then, the second part included 22 statements that evolved around the use of English inside and outside school, the importance of this language and ESP classes, as well as the factors/reasons behind these attitudes; that is, whether they are driven by instrumental or integrative objectives (Gardner & Lambert, 1972). Also, according to Kaplan (1993) and Watson (1995), motivation can be self-reported by measuring different dimensions, namely interest, enjoyment, effort, usefulness, and perceived competence.

With regard to the validity of the questionnaire, after we made it consistent with attitudinal questionnaires used in previous studies, it was examined for readability, clarity of wording, and layout. Next, we ran a test of Cronbach's alpha which is a coefficient of internal reliability. More specifically, Cronbach's alpha measures the consistency of the items in the questionnaire and determines the degree to which this data collection instrument is accurately measuring the variable(s) of interest. The closer the obtained figure is to 1, the higher the internal consistency of the items is. With regard to the internal consistency of the items in the questionnaire used in the present study, the figure obtained was .75, suggesting that the items have relatively good internal consistency.

### **3.4. Data Analysis Procedure**

After the collection of data, the questionnaire was coded, and the answers were fed into EXCEL for further analysis. Frequencies and percent distribution were calculated. To answer the two research questions underlying the present study, quantitative data were displayed in the form of graphs. The next sections present and discuss the study's findings on university students' attitudes toward learning English for specific purposes in the Moroccan context. They also reveal the factors that nurture such attitudes and show the participants' preference and importance of learning English by gender on the one hand and stream of study on the other hand.

## **4. RESULTS**

### **4.1. Students' Attitudes towards Learning ESP**

As previously mentioned, the main objective of the present study is to explore Moroccan ESP university students' attitudes toward learning English for specific purposes. It also aims to uncover the different factors behind these attitudes. Most of the findings are reported in percentages. They show the frequency of use of English inside and outside school, the degree of importance of English for specific purposes for the respondents, their perceived competence in this language, and their motivational reasons to learn English for specific purposes (instrumental or integrative).

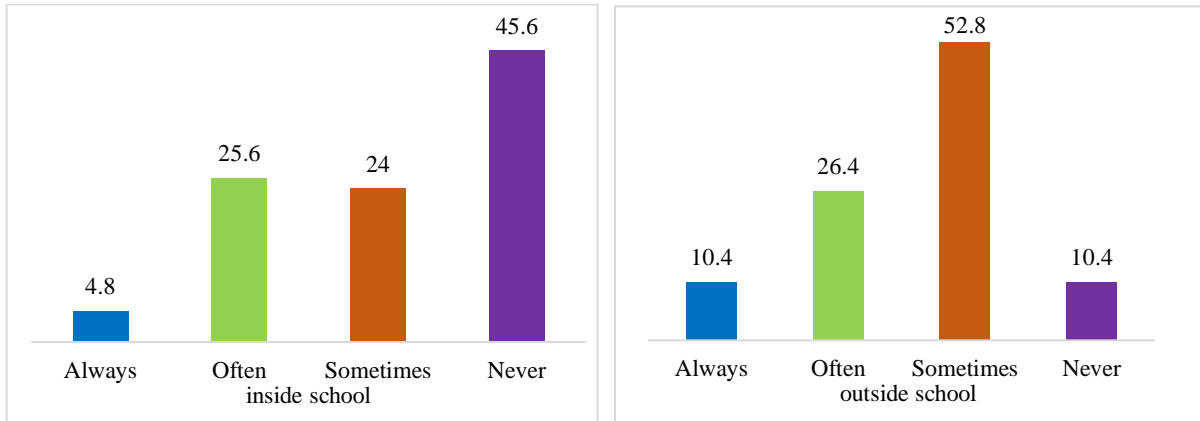


Figure 1: Use of English by Moroccan ESP students inside and outside home

As can be seen in Figure 1 above, most of the participants use English inside and outside the school to varying degrees. The striking finding is the scarce use of English inside the school with colleagues and classmates. Almost half of the respondents never use English inside the school, while at least 26% of the students speak it, but only 5% report that they always use it. However, English is more used outside the school with friends and relatives. The next figure below reveals the importance of English for the respondents.

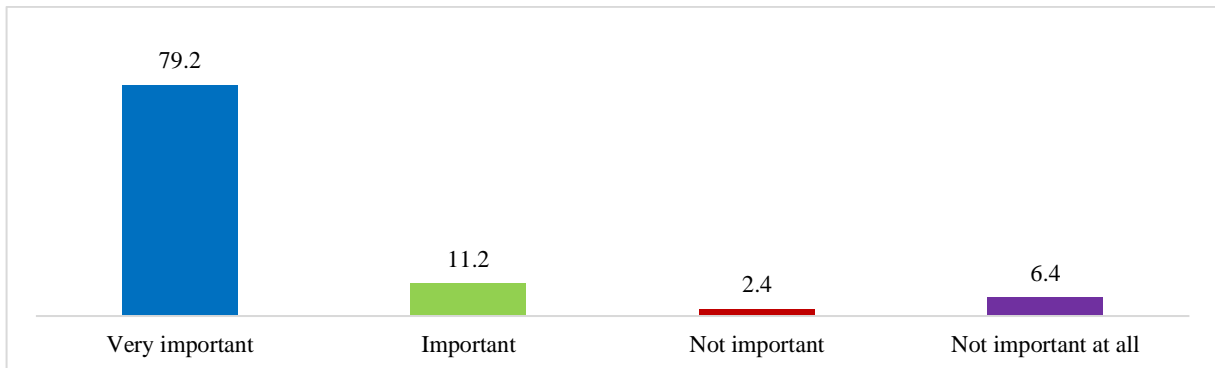


Figure 2: Importance of English for Moroccan ESP students

Figure 2 shows that English is specifically granted high importance among the participants under study. Only 8% deem English an unimportant language. This, in turn, reflects that the majority of Moroccan ESP university students are acutely conscious of the tremendous importance of English in their current studies and future careers as well. The details of the importance of English in relation to the stream of study and gender are reported in the following table and figure, respectively.



Table 2: Importance of English for ESP university students by the stream of study

School	Stream of study	Very important	Important	Not important	Not important at all
ENAM	Agriculture engineering	74 59.2%	10 8%	1 0.8%	7 5.6%
ENSA	Industrial engineering	6 4.8%	2 1.6%	0 0.0%	0 0.0%
ENCG	Business, commerce & management	15 12%	4 3.2	0 0.0%	0 0.0%
FMP	Medicine & pharmacy	5 4%	1 0.8%	0 0.0%	0 0.0%

It is clear that most Moroccan ESP students, regardless of their major, do not underestimate the importance of the English language. Despite the fact that students are not specialized in English and that their tertiary studies are all in French, they still regard English as an important language and a key advantage in their future careers. Also, contrary to the general belief that females like foreign languages more than males, Figure 3 below shows that English is appreciated in a similar way by both female and male university ESP students.

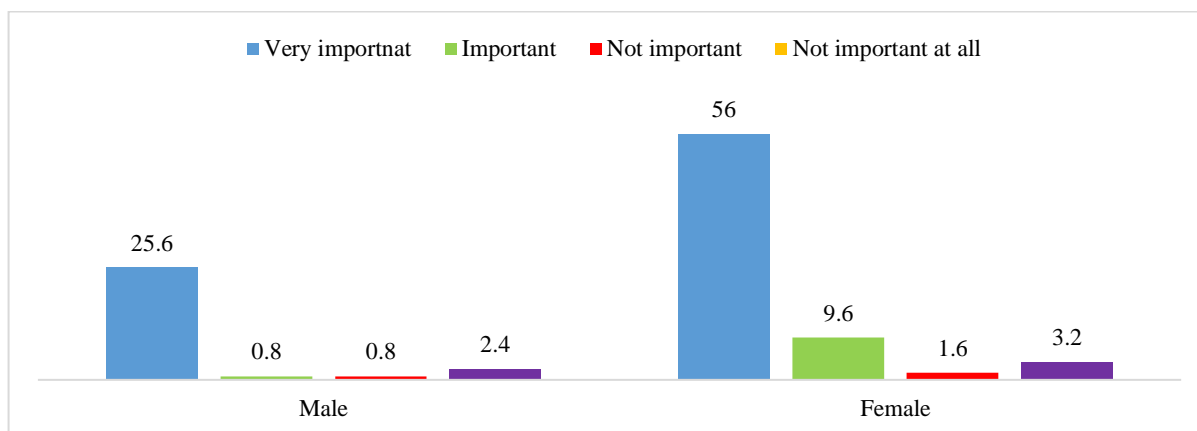


Figure 3: Students' preference of English by gender

Another factor that reveals a positive attitude towards a language is the student's motivation to learn that particular language. The answers came as follows:

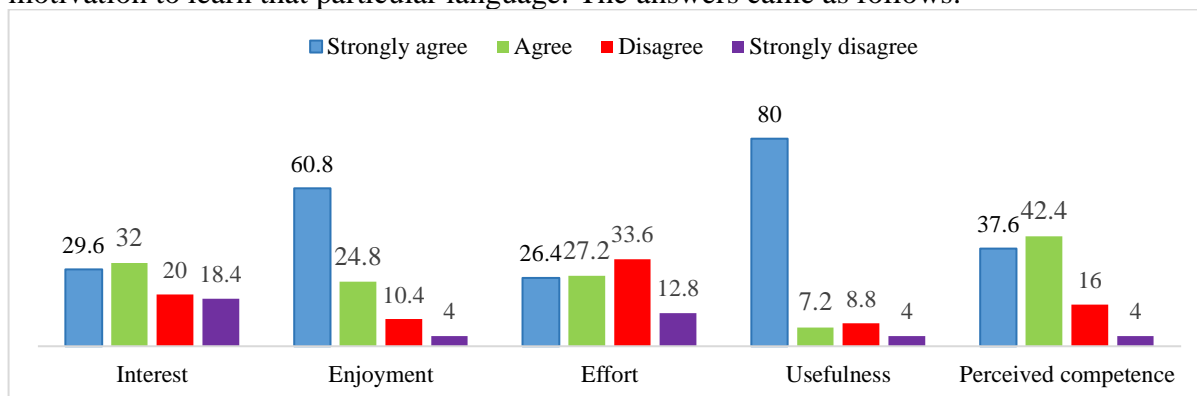


Figure 4: Students' motivation to learn ESP

Motivation is a crucial part and parcel of attitude in language learning. Students’ high motivation usually results from positive attitudes towards the target language. Likewise, students’ low motivation to learn a language can be due to their negative attitudes toward it. As can be seen in the figure above, 61.6% of the respondents claim that they are interested in learning English, 85.6% enjoy learning it, 53.6% put in an effort to learn it, 87.2% consider it a useful language, and 80% perceive themselves as competent in English. It, therefore, follows that the majority of the participants have a high level of motivation to learn this language and, thus, take positive attitudes.

#### 4.2. Students’ Motives for Learning ESP

In addition to this, the study has investigated the students’ motives for learning English for specific purposes. The participants have chosen the following reasons:

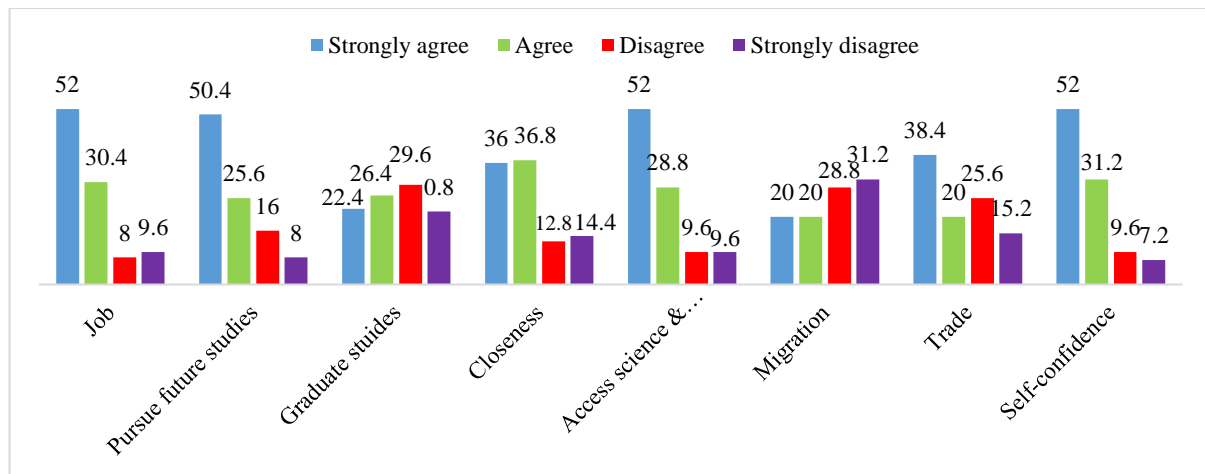


Figure 5: Instrumental reasons for students learning ESP

The results in Figure 5 lend support to the fact that a good command of English for specific purposes offers considerable opportunities for progress and development. As a matter of fact, most of the instrumental reasons for learning English that received the high scores (the addition of results for *Strongly Agree* and *Agree* equals 80%) are those which have a direct effect on the students, namely finding a job, pursuing future studies, having access to science and technology, and developing self-confidence. Also, bringing different communities closer has received quite the same percentages. Other reasons, such as migrating, and running their own business, received less attention. A further parameter to investigate was the students’ integrative reasons to learn ESP. The analysis uncovered that both instrumental and integrative reasons received the same percentages as Figure 6 below shows:

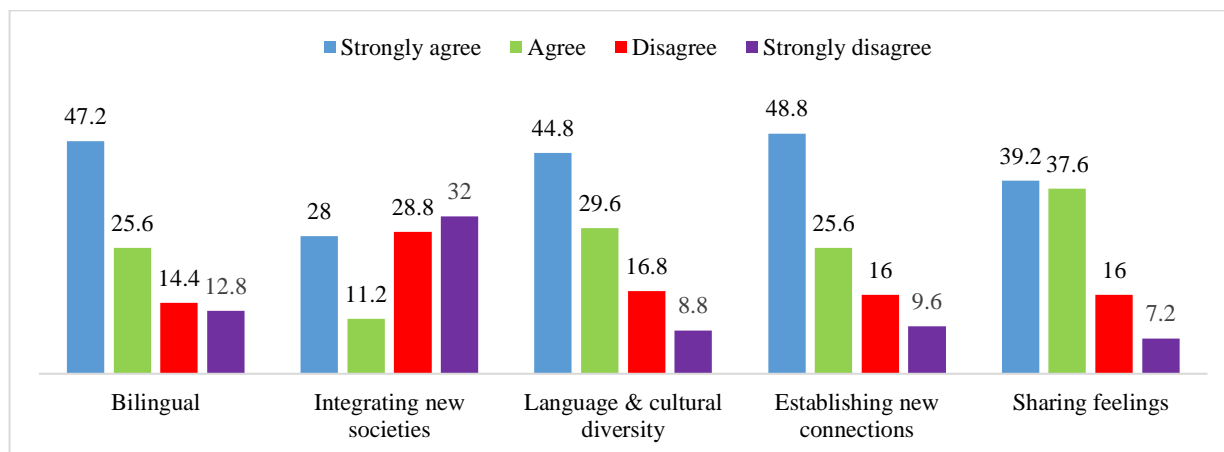


Figure 6: Integrative reasons for students learning ESP

In similar terms, the factors that directly affect students, such as becoming bilingual, maintaining language diversity, learning about different cultures, establishing new connections, and sharing feelings, received the highest scores. Also, when *Strongly Agree* and *Agree* are added up, the scores revealed that the participants devoted less attention to “integrating new societies” as a motive to learn English for specific purposes. In fine, Figures 5 and 6 show that Moroccan ESP university students have both instrumental and integrative reasons for learning English for specific purposes.

## 5. DISCUSSION

It is worth reiterating that the current research aimed to explore Moroccan ESP university students' attitudes toward learning English for specific purposes and the factors that nurture such attitudes. As reported above, the overall findings provide answers to the two research questions that guide the present study. To answer the first research question, it can be concluded that Moroccan university students belonging to different streams of the study hold positive attitudes toward learning English for specific purposes. Such attitudes are nurtured by both instrumental and integrative motives. More specifically, the participants believe in the importance of this language as it will help them reach their personal objectives and seize the opportunities if offered in their studies/careers. The willingness of Moroccan youths to seek better job opportunities and build successful careers may explain such results.

A major factor that nurtures positive attitudes toward learning English for specific purposes lies in the important instrumental functions that this language grants to its speakers. It has been shown in the literature review that many ESP students are interested in learning English because they are aware of the potential usefulness and considerable benefit of this language in their future careers (El Kandoussi, 2019; Elyazale, 2019; Martinović & Poljaković, 2010; Otanjac, 2021). To put it in Elinson's (2013) words, learning a foreign language such as English now “is viewed as necessary for success in a wide range of fields including science, technology, and business” (p. 716).

Another factor can be deduced from the participants' answers to questions related to their integrative and instrumental motives for learning English for specific purposes. Their

answers implicitly show that they understand that learning a new language implies exploring a new world. This, in turn, goes hand-in-hand with Alharbi's (2022) findings that Saudi healthcare students have positive attitudes towards learning English for specific purposes because, in addition to other instrumental benefits, it helps them discover a new society, a new people, and a new culture. As Brown (2000) puts it, learning a foreign language implies reaching beyond the confines of one's first language and into a new language, a new culture, and a new way of thinking, feeling, and acting.

In addition to this, it should be noted that although these results are consistent with most of the published studies, they still do not support other results. In contrast with earlier findings reported in the literature (Alqahtani, 2015; Anwar, 2017; Arslan & Akbarov, 2012), the current research finds that Moroccan ESP university students hold positive attitudes towards learning English for specific purposes even though it is not their major. The majority of the participants make an effort to learn this language and, most importantly, enjoy learning it. They have shown their interest to learn ESP in spite of the fact that it is not one of their field courses. Another motive can be attributed to the status of this language worldwide as an international lingua-franca (Sadiqi, 1991). In general, the present study's findings reinforce the fact that Moroccan students will always hold positive attitudes toward learning English, both for general and specific purposes.

## **6. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

This study sought to investigate attitudes among Moroccan third-year university students who were non-language majors towards learning English and the factors that nurture such attitudes. Overall, the results revealed that most students hold positive attitudes toward learning English for specific purposes. These students learn English and consider it an important and useful language because of some instrumental motives. That is to say, the factors that nurture such attitudes are related to how important, useful, and instrumental English is for learners' personal objectives. In addition to this, other factors are a high level of motivation to learn English, a keen interest in the culture of English-speaking countries, intense interest in meeting new people worldwide, a strong belief that English is vital in students' future careers, the status of English as an international lingua-franca, and students' enjoyment to learn this foreign language. In light of these findings, a number of implications are in order.

First, decisions and policymakers should introduce the teaching of English for specific purposes in the first year of tertiary education. In most Moroccan higher education institutions, ESP is limited to being taught as a mandatory subject only in the first semester of the third year. Instead, given the positive attitudes that most students adopt towards learning ESP, it is high time we implemented ESP throughout their university study years. In this way, students are more likely to deepen their knowledge, expand their vocabulary, and enhance their English language skills in their field of specialization. Second, ESP practitioners are also called to exploit students' motivation in learning English by engaging them in different practical language learning tasks that meet their interests and objectives. Teachers should place more emphasis on providing learners with opportunities to use

English in real-life situations. Students need to be equipped with the necessary tools that they need to communicate in English in their future jobs.

Last but not least, the current research is not void of limitations. This study used a questionnaire as the only tool for data collection. For future studies, it is recommended to conduct interviews or focus groups with ESP students in order to develop a deep understanding of Moroccan university students' attitudes toward learning English for specific purposes. Besides, studies with a larger sample size, including participants from other higher education institutions and faculties, are also needed for generalization purposes.

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