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Soft Skills, Employability and Vocational English: ENSAM School of Engineering in Rabat as a Case Study

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Abstract:
This article seeks to analyze ENSAM engineering students' employability and soft skills using vocational/professional English in STEM fields. It also aims to understand the gaps they need to fill from theory to practice to meet the job market requirements. This study is an attempt to find answers about (1) the kind of employability and soft skills needed for Moroccan engineering graduates; (2) the practices considered to teach these skills through Professional English course; (3) ENSAM students' attitude toward this course, engineering education, and employability; and (4) the target course's feasibility to support the teaching/learning of the aforementioned skills. Therefore, the current study will give a descriptive map of these students' needs based on their attitudes concerning the course of Professional English they studied. In this regard, to collect the data, we use an online Likert scale survey with a target population consisting of 30 ENSAM students in Rabat, Morocco. The motive behind this study is to find new insights concerning employability opportunities for engineering students using Vocational English to meet the current and future changing demands of the job market and to develop better language programs and syllabi for Moroccan engineering students. Results reveal that the course enhances students' job skills (e.g., Interviews, profile building, etc.). Besides, some students reach good to excellent level in certain skills (e.g. soft-skills) while others still lack some skills (e.g. content-language). Finally, the course's input/output requires both practitioners and students' contributions for its success.

Keywords: Vocational English, Employability, Soft Skills, STEM, ENSAM, Engineering.

1. Introduction

Morocco has evolved over the past few decades in many domains. In relation to socioeconomic reforms, education has become an integral part focusing on digital transformations, research development, and soft and employability skills for youth and university graduates. The new development model 2020-2035 focused a lot on "integrating new technologies and involving youth in change making for positive impacts on their communities" (The New Development Model: General Report, 2021, pp. 23 – 44). Morocco is currently undergoing a shift from French to English in many higher education institutions, a fact linked to the implementation of English for Specific Purposes (ESP) and Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) education. This study gives a descriptive map of ENSAM engineering students' Employability Skills (ES) and needs based on their attitudes concerning the course of Professional English they studied in the 2022-2023 academic year.

2. Conceptual Framework

In this section, we present definitions of soft skills and ES for the reader to get a close idea about the topic. We are also addressing brief points regarding the literature about engineering, soft skills, ES, ESP, and STEM fields.

Since the scope of this study focuses on engineering, ES, and VE, we are going to define engineering and ES in this part while we provide the definition of VE until later sections. First, according to Bianca and Peter (2004), engineering is considered as "a profession directed towards the skilled application of a distinctive body of knowledge based on mathematics, science and technology" (Bianca & Peter, 2004, cited in Zaharim, et.al, 2016, p.195 & Mousumi, 2018, p. 1810).

Additionally, engineering delivers the message that technical competency alone is no longer sufficient for future success; instead, as Brown (2005) puts it "communication, project management and leadership skills are becoming more important than ever" (p. 61). This new trend emanates from the rising need to adapt to changing demands of the global market, which require new employability skills not just technical knowledge transferred through application only.

Parsad (2017) also defines employability as "a set of achievements, understanding and personal attributes" (p.17). Concerning ES, Robinson (2000) defines them as "those basic skills necessary for getting, keeping, and doing well on a job" (p.1). These skills have two parameters, i.e., being Transferable (Yorke, 2006) and Teachable (Lorraine, 2007).

A working definition of ES is as follows: A set of abilities individuals acquire to achieve successful careers. In the next section, we are going to address more aspects about the differences and similarities between soft and employability skills.

2.1.Employability Skills vs. Soft Skills

There are two models about ES: The European and Asian (Al Asefer & Zainal, 2021). First, according to the European perspective, ES are closely related to soft skills as shown in Table1 below:

Names proposed to define soft skills	Proposed by
Life Skills	World Health Organization (1993)
Transversal Skills	Istituto per la formazione e l'oreintation al lavaro. ISFOL (1998)
Generic Competences	Tuning Project (2000)
Key Competencies for successful life and a well-functioning society	Organization for Economic Co-operating and Development. OCED (2003)
Key competences for lifelong learning	European Union (2006)
21st century skills	Ananiadou & Claro (2009)
Transferable skills	RPIC-Vip (2011)
Future work skills	Institute for the Future. IFTF (2010)
Soft skills for talent	Manpower Group (2014)
Skills for social progress	Organization for Economic Co-operating and Development. OCED (2015)

Table 1. A model of the soft Skills for Employability, Adapted from Cinque (2015).

Figure 1. Categories of Employability Skills.

In their study, Manuel Caeiro-Rodrguez, et al (2019) review the promotion and teaching of soft skills in higher education across five European countries: Greece, Estonia, Denmark, Portugal and Spain. Their investigation provides an overview of the best practices these countries offer in teaching soft skills with special reference to ES through the focus on technological solutions that foster the development of soft skills.

The European Union (EU) and the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) proposed several titles for soft skills through history as shown in figure 1 above. According to Al Asefer and Zainal (2021), "specific competences refer to hard skills and generic competences refer to soft skills" (p.47).

The aforementioned points are also present in Morocco, but they are a work in progress, which needs more efforts to move from physical infrastructures to digital ones. This would help future engineers to apply the ES they receive and increase practical opportunities, let alone easing the procedure of new job market needs and meeting the requirements of recruiters. The Digital Talent Review (2021), which advocates this fact, states that digital skills became a critical part of any national digital strategy to promote economic and social development. However, many nations have developed strategies, which focus on promoting the development of technological infrastructure without considering the skills needed to use, build, and manage it. In this context, Morocco is no exception, for the Kingdom allocated a lot of efforts to physical infrastructure over the last two decades (p.8).

Concerning the Asian Perspective of ES, Zaharim, et al (2019) studied different Asian countries such as Malaysia, Japan, Singapore and Hong Kong. Their paper provided a list of the ES needed by the four countries and compared between the similarities and differences. According to Al Asefer and Zainal (2021), this set of skills, also called employability soft skills, is defined and summed up in Table 2 below.

Skills	Definitions
Communication skills/Foreign languages	Understanding and performing in a language different from L1. Transmitting information and common understanding from a person to another that requires knowledge and understanding of the social and cultural factors in a situation.
Problem solving	Engaging in the action or thoughts necessary to find a solution to a difficult or complex situation and resolve problems.
Leadership	The ability to motivate and positively influence others to achieve specific through leading a team.
Critical Thinking	Gathering, analyzing and articulating information from different sources for solving problems and making decisions.
Creativity	Thinking outside the box in order to bring new ideas to solve problems.
Decision making	Thinking of several choices, relevant information and predicting the consequences.
Teamwork	Involves a set of independent activities performed by individuals who collaborate toward a common goal.
Future work skills	The process of planning and exercising conscious control of the time spent on a specific activity.

Table 2. Employability soft skills, Adapted from Amirrudin & Salleh (2016); Shivoro et al. (2017 Ornellas, et al (2018); Sanyal & Hisam (2018); Kashyap (2019) and Li, et al. (2019).

As you can see in Figure 1 above, these skills are also include three major categories: (1) applied knowledge (e.g. critical thinking, academic skills,), (2) effective relationships (e.g. personal skills), and (3) workplace skills (e.g. communication).

2.2.ESP, Vocational English, STEM Education and Employability in Morocco.

Several researchers have recently investigated STEM Education and its relation to employability, soft skills, and ESP to account for the issues and solutions to provide the best teaching or learning experience for both practitioners and students.

2.2.1. ESP and Vocational English

ESP has become a significant trend in English Language Teaching (ELT) in different respects. Initially, between the 1950's and 1970's, research began with observing students' attitudes towards the traditional ELT practices, more precisely General English (GE). As advocated by Mc Donough (1984), "all learners were served up with literature regardless of their aims, needs or interests" (p. 4). Concerning English for Vocational Purposes (EVP), which is one of ESP branches, Widodo (2016) states that, "EVP is deeply connected to Vocational Oriented Language Learning (VOLL), which refers to the teaching and learning of a foreign language within a vocational context" (p.41). As for Content Language Integrated Learning (CLIL), Lindahl (2015) points out that "CLIL can be a 'dual-focused approach' that focuses both on language and content" (p. 24). Therefore, before dealing with EVP aspects "as goals, content, and approaches, it may be useful to check the definitions of all these terms, which are inter-connected (Widodo, 2016, p.39).

As far as we are concerned, the purpose of CLIL and VOLL is to teach content more than language, which is the same case for the ENSAM Professional English course.

2.2.2. Previous Studies: ESP, EVP and STEM Education in Morocco

The inception of ESP studies in Morocco started with the Moroccan Association of Teachers English (MATE) Conference papers, especially with Ouakrime (1986), Zaki (1997), and Abouabdelkader (2000). Other subsequent studies focused on two research poles: (1) ESP methodology and instruction approaches in the light of needs analysis (Mahraj, 2019; Ait Hattani, 2019; El Kandoussi, 2017; Dahbi, 2016; Larouz & Kerouad. (2015); Akhajam & Elkarfa, 2012) and (2) ICT implementation in ESP courses (El Messaoudi,

2021; Bourzgui et al, 2021; Boutahar, 2020; Zakhir, 2018; Dkhissi, 2014). However, despite the growth of research interests, none of the foregoing literature studies report about students' perceptions towards learning ESP, especially within the growing demand of integrating better ESP approaches in the STEM fields. Therefore, it is crucial to stimulate entrepreneurial practices among students by integrating science and technology. The learning model that accommodates science, technology, and innovation for entrepreneurship, known as STEM learning, is an approach that integrates content and skill of science, technology, engineering and mathematics in real life situations simultaneously (Siew et al, 2015; Cinar et. al, 2016).

According to Britel and Cherkaoui (2021), integrating STEM in Morocco requires effective communication, collaborative approaches, and commitment. Another study by Yeou et al (2022) focuses on language attitudes by Moroccan students towards learning English as a foreign language. This research provides "new paradigms and strategies to teach STEM and ESP in Morocco based on university students' attitudes towards learning English" (Yeou et al, 2022, p. 617). El Yazale (2019), who deals with students from other disciplines like STEM, finds out that most of the participants hold positive attitudes towards learning English for specific purposes. In the same vein, El Kandoussi (2019) investigates students' attitudes toward learning ESP in vocational schools. His findings show that most students adopt positive attitudes towards English due to the way they associate learning ESP within STEM fields. In addition, El Ajraoui and Naciri (2022) point out that many students agree that ESP practitioners affect students' preferences about literacy in ESP, because the former, i.e., practitioners, assign STEM students specific roles that enhance their communicative competence in favor of performative one while reading and writing in English (p.47).

Belkbir (2019) also reports that "Moroccan students' performance in the English language does not really allow them to speak, listen, write and read using English in specific fields" (p. 70). In fact, this shift in ESP vehicles the development of new curriculum and approaches to the teaching of English, especially in STEM fields, which require joint efforts to make the transition from French to English in academic content instruction and career development easier than ever. However, we believe that this shift from French to English is not complete in Moroccan higher education. It is rather an extension of previous attempts to create a sort of linguistic balance in various academic program in Morocco. It is worth mentioning that all the aforementioned points indicate that employability and soft skills are very important to consider in the teaching of ESP and STEM in Moroccan higher education.

2.2.3. Soft and Employability skills in Moroccan Higher Education

The integration of soft and employability skills in Morocco has become a fact due to the rising demands and changes of the new global market. In fact, these skills have become a primary criterion for employers and schools to adapt with the aforementioned changes. The Moroccan ministry of higher education made different reforms to ensure the implementation and development of soft skills such as the Bachelor Degree Reform of 2019 (BDR) which subsequent authorities cancelled due to the need for other alternatives . In 2022, Dr. Miraoui, the minister of Moroccan higher education and scientific research, introduced a modified version of the LMD system (Licence, Master, Doctorat) to open more space for soft skills implementation in the curriculum. He introduced such reforms for better students' job market integration. Kesbi (2015), who focuses on the relation between Moroccan educational system and the current job market, suggests that "there is a high demand for changing the policy dealing with the foreign language, especially that of English teaching in Morocco" (p.1). Another study by Ait Tejan and Sabil (2019) deals with Moroccan university students' career development needs. They maintain that "Moroccan universities

should grant more importance to career development in their syllabi…Moroccan universities should allocate more resources towards career development" (Ait Tejan and Sabil, 2019, p. 1243). Focusing on employers' demands, Chaibate et al (2020) investigate "the requirements of the Moroccan employers, particularly, the soft skills developed in engineering schools, in order to gear up more employability opportunities that meet the aforementioned standards" (p.142). In 2022, other insights about developing good content and curricula for Soft skills and ES emerged. First, Aziz and Zaidoune (2022) reports that the majority of teachers deem the integration of soft skills in the higher education curriculum important for employability. Another study by El Aida and Sabil (2022a) examines "the factors that impact students' choice of English Studies as their college major" (p. 359). It focuses on variables like gender, age, university degree, effect of media, employment status, and so on. The study also "explores the employment status and the job opportunities offered to English major graduates in the Moroccan job market" (p.359). Finally, Mansouri (2022) contributes to understanding the training-employment relationship in the current debate on job training mismatch and higher education's ability to train employable graduates in Morocco in light of the following parameters:

> reasons that might explain why graduates do not all integrate into the job market under the same conditions, (2) information on university open admissions institutions' graduates as the most affected by the employability skills deficiency, (3) and the university's fundamental missions [that] have now added new expectations from society and public authorities (pp. 37-38).

In fact, Mansouri (2022) examines Moroccan university graduates' employability skills from Moroccan employers' perspectives. The study concludes that university graduates' lack of employability was due to [individual] factors related to the graduates, [institutional factors] related to the education system, and factors related to the labor market…these social, behavioral, cognitive, and emotional skills, which are [transversal and crossed] in the sense that each has an impact on the other, allow graduates to integrate into the job market (p.39).

In short, we have provided definitions and information about the existing body of research working on ESP, STEM, soft skills, and employability skills in Morocco. These previous inquiries are important and relate to the current study, which aims to offer new insights about the topic under scrutiny.

3. The Empirical Study

In this part, we present the methodology used in this study including objectives, questions, hypotheses, and sample. We also analyze the collected data and report our findings.

3.1.Research Objectives

This study endeavors to understand students' needs for soft skills and ES and find out the differences and issues that occur based on their experience in the Professional English course. It also seeks to provide a scope for ES tailored for ENSAM engineering school in Rabat via its Professional English course. Finally, it attempts to provide new insights about the status of Professional English and its support for teaching/learning employability skills and soft skills.

3.2.Research Questions

To achieve the purposes of this study, we address the following questions:

- What employability skills do students need for engineering?
- What are the ES teaching practices in the Professional English course?
- What are the students' opinions regarding the course, their field of study, and employability?
- How can the course support ES for graduates?

3.3.Research Hypotheses

We assume that the Professional English course benefits ENSAM students in their employability opportunities. We also hypothesize that the target course enhances ENSAM students' soft skills and ES.

3.4. Data Collection Method

To collect the attitudes of ENSAM students about employability skills in the Professional English course, we used an online Likert scale survey that contains 23 questions, (i.e. background questions and statements about factors investigated in this study). To begin with, the number of participants was 30 students from ENSAM School of Engineering, Mohammed V University in Rabat. We classified the participants into sections based on a stratified random sampling technique as we can see in Figure 2 below.

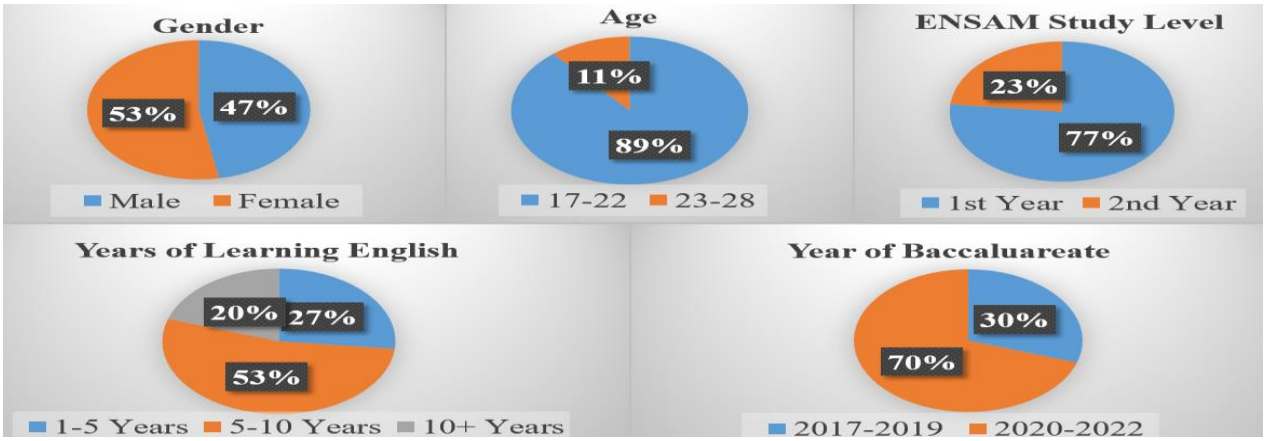


Figure 2. Categorization of participants' background information.

First, concerning gender, there is an approximately equal number of participants as opposed to age. The latter's responses show that the majority of the participants (89%) are aged between 17 and 22, which is also relevant in their study level as most of them (77%) are freshmen. Another similar factor is year of baccalaureate with 70% of participants graduated between 2020 and 2022.

Finally, years of learning English is also a relevant factor, which influences students' attitudes about the Professional English course. More than half of the responses (53%) indicate a period of learning English between 5 and 10 years. The periods of 10 years and more show a slight difference of percentage with 20 % for the former and 27% for the latter. Though all these factors are important, we focus on the third and fifth ones as variables that influence the results of the study.

3.5.Results and Discussion

This section is devoted to the analysis of the findings focusing on the aforementioned variables.

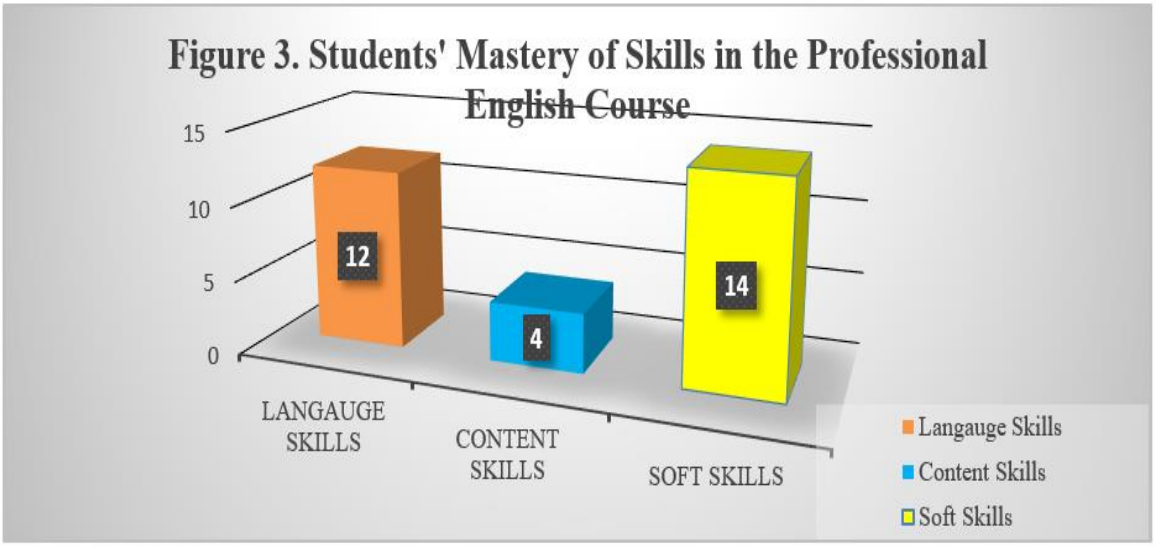
3.5.1. Research Findings

The findings of the survey revolve around three main parts, which we outline as follows.

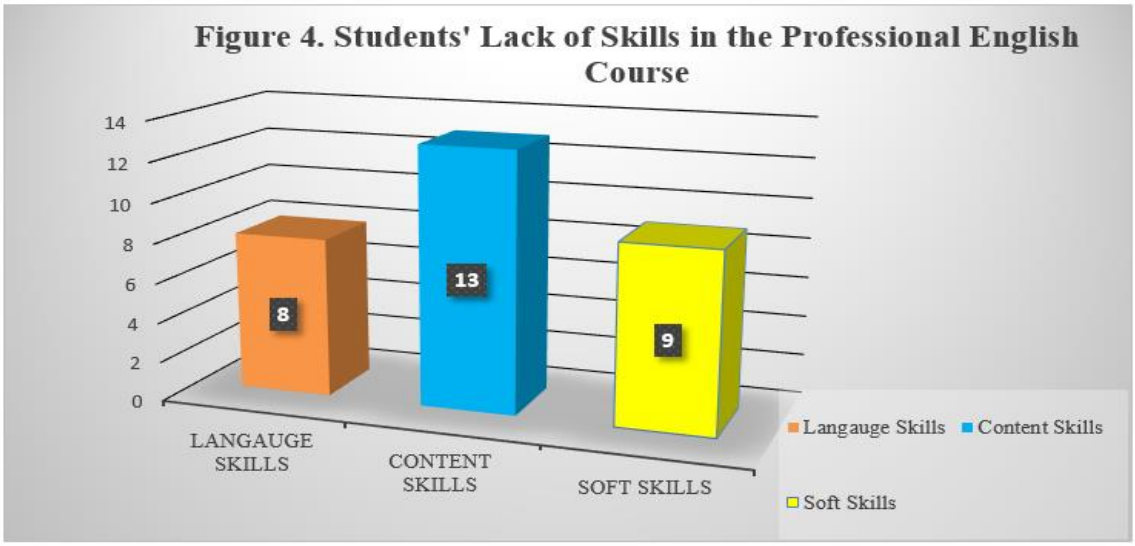
3.5.1.1. Students' skills achievements and lacks

In this category, we focus on the questionnaire's items 6, 7, 8, and 9 for students' attitudes toward the Professional English course. As we can see in figure 3 below, it is clear that many students show positive opinions about the direct impact of Professional English on their skills. These responses are from questions 6 and 8, which indicate that students acquired some good skills in the course that can influence their job

opportunities.



First, 14 participants confirmed that they gained soft skills like good communication and leadership. These skills have become essential for every student regardless of their educational background. The course activities that students practice in presentations or even in a round table discussion allow them to gain more self-confidence and expertise to transfer their ideas or share their points of view. Similarly, 12 participants pointed out that they improved their language skills and learned new vocabulary and functional grammar, which all helped them use English in their field of study especially in reading English publications and documents and writing in this lingua franca. Some students also learn from speaking activities as a way of acquiring new vocabulary on different topics in their major. However, content skills' rate remain low even though students showed some interest since only 4 informants stated that their content skills have increased. Figure 4 below confirms this fact, namely in relation to questions 7 and 9.



Thirteen participants confirmed that they still lack content skills in the course due to several reasons like the restricted use of English in their field of study. In this regard, the participants expressed their need to integrate scientific content in the course activities with more specialized domains like engineering and entrepreneurship.

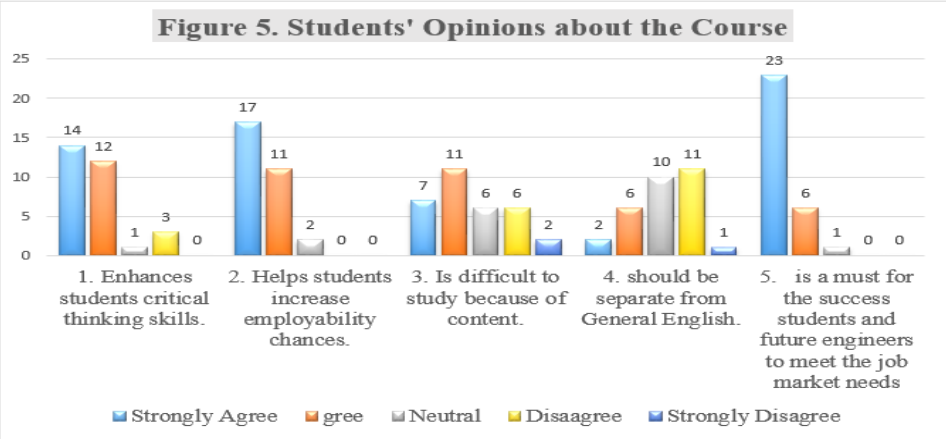
Other results reveal that nine students lack soft skills because of many factors like stage fright and anxiety, which are related to public speaking and job interviewing. In fact, all these results report that despite the increasing importance of soft skills, decision makers should consider some factors while devising new pedagogical activities like coaching or training. Moreover, nine participants said that they lack language skills due to English itself or to the transfer from one language to another.

All the above-mentioned results confirm that the professional English course had positive impacts on students' employability skills, particularly communication and soft skills. However, more efforts need to be considered with regard to content language, which is also important to many students for their academic achievements. Based on students' needs, a balance between content and language corpuses is the best match to reach positive results for employability skills in the Professional English course.

3.5.1.2. Students' Opinions about the Course

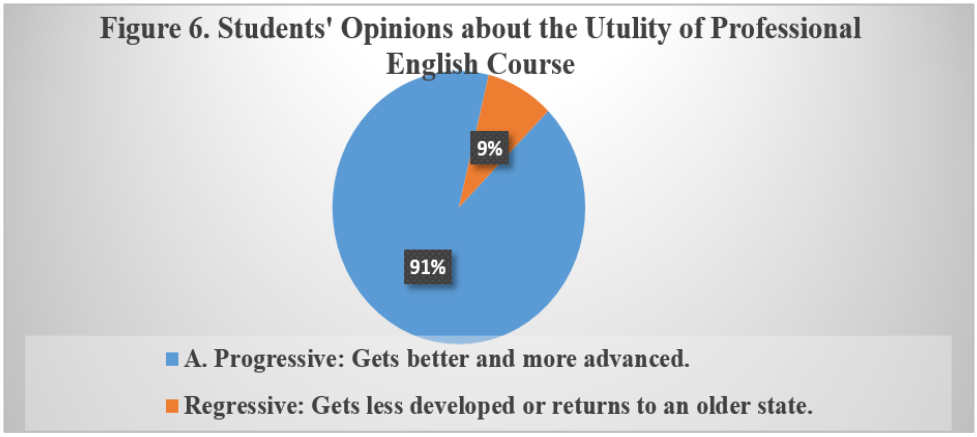
In this category, we will focus on questions 10 and 11, which inquire about the role of the professional English course in boosting students' employability skills. As we can see in figure 5 below, informants agree that the course is very helpful in many ways:

- It is very important for students to enhance their critical thinking skills.
- It is a must for their success and future careers to meet the job market needs.
- It is very essential for their employability skills.



Based on the results presented in figure 5 above, the majority of participants disagree or "refuse" two elements:

- Professional English course should be separate from General English.
- Professional English course is difficult to study because of content.

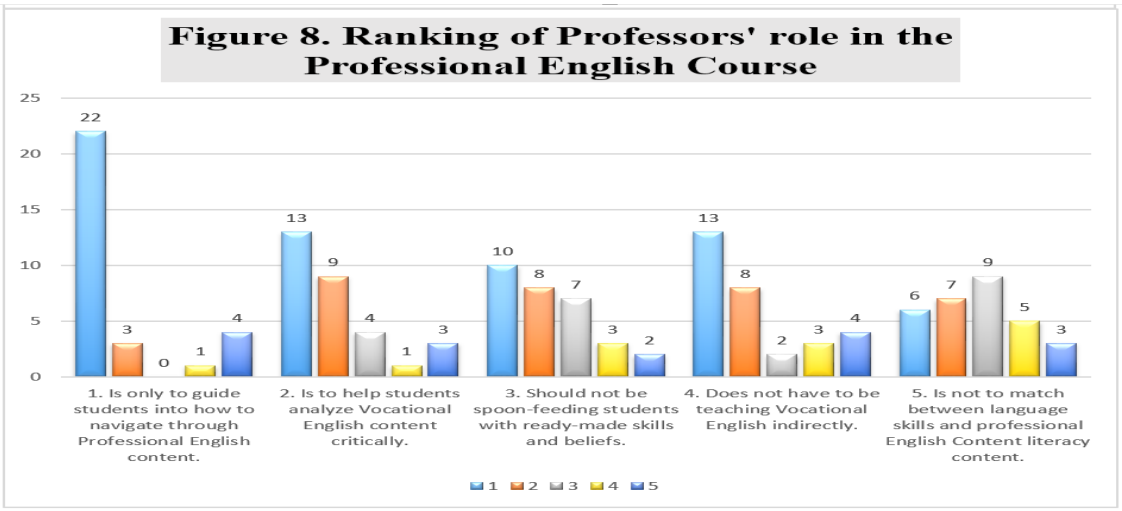


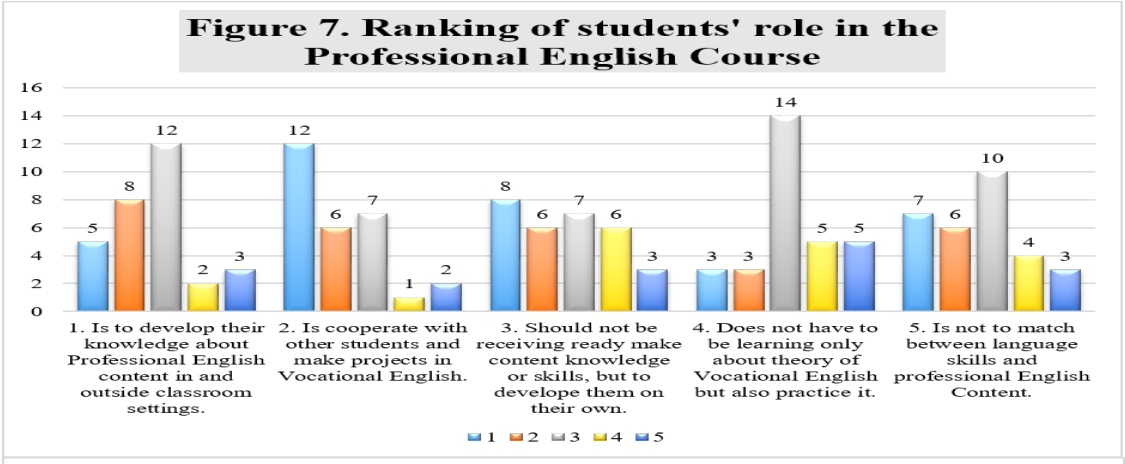
These findings are also relevant to the status of the Professional English course and its importance in engineering education and the job market. As illustrated in figure 6 below, a large number of participants agree on the importance of the target course, which is very progressive in the sense that students' level improves with time and curriculum advancement. This fact confirms earlier students' attitudes about the role of certain modules or course components in their academic achievements as well as job-hunting and career development.

Considering the informants' responses, we can claim that the target course is indispensable for engineering students who undoubtedly developed their employability skills and soft skills together with their general English.

3.5.1.3.Ranking of Professors and Students' Roles in the Professional English Course

In this category, we will focus on questions 12 and 13. According to the participants' perceptions, certain statements about the Professors and students' roles in the course vary depending on their experience. First, we asked our informants to rank some statements from "extremely important" to "not important". The purpose was to determine whether professors are mainly responsible for the content and skills provided in the course or students have their share as well. Secondly, the roles' ranking assessment was set to account for the highest and lowest scores for pedagogical purposes. As we can see in figures 7 and 8 below, 86% of the participants view the Professors' role as equally important as the students' participation and engagement in the course content and activities.





Concerning Professors and students' roles, the results, presented in tables 3 and 4 below, reveal that two elements are most important while two others are not. One element remains neutral.

Degree of Importance	Role	Percentage
Most important	"only to guide students into how to navigate through Professional English content"	70.7 %
	"to help students analyze Vocational English content critically."	
Neutral	"Is not to match between language skills and professional English Content literacy content."	11.3%,
Not important	"Should not be spoon-feeding students with ready-made skills and beliefs."	18%
	"Does not have to be teaching Vocational English indirectly."	

Table 4. Categorizing participants' opinions about their professors' role

Degree of Importance	Role	Percentage
Most important	"cooperating with other students and make projects in Vocational English"	77 %
	"developing their knowledge about Professional English content in and outside classroom settings"	
Neutral	"It does not have to be learning only about theory of Vocational English but also practicing it"	18.2%
Not important	"Should not be receiving ready make content knowledge or skills, but to develop them on their own"	4.8%
	"Is not to match between language skills and professional English Content." for as slightly important.	

Table 3. Categorizing participants' opinions about their roles.

According to the ranking of each role (students and professors) and its characteristics, we interpret and summarize all these aforementioned results in table 5 below:

Ranking	Students' Role	Professors' Role
1st	Is to cooperate with other students and make projects in Vocational English.	Is only to guide students into how to navigate through Professional English content.
2nd	Is to develop their knowledge about Professional English content in and outside classroom settings.	Is to help students analyze Vocational English content critically.
3rd	Does not have to be learning only about theory of Vocational English but also practice it.	Is not to match between language skills and professional English Content literacy content.
4th	Should not be receiving ready make content knowledge or skills, but to develop them on their own.	Should not be spoon-feeding students with ready-made skills and beliefs.
5th	Is not to match between language skills and professional English Content.	Does not have to be teaching Vocational English indirectly.

Table 5. Categorizing participants' ranking about their roles and their professors.

In this section, we provided the results of the collected data in three parts presented as follows:

- The Professional English course enhances students' employability skills (i.e. job interviews, profile building, and so on).
- In the course, some students reach good to excellent level in certain skills (i.e. soft-skills) while others still lack some skills (i.e. content-language).
- The course's input/output requires both practitioners and students' contributions for its success.

In the following section, we will spot some limitations of our research inquiry and suggest a set of pedagogical recommendations.

4. Research Limitations and Recommendations

This article has been an academic response to the Moroccan higher education's need to integrate soft and employability skills in the STEM fields with a special reference to the ENSAM School of engineering in Rabat. However, there are some limitations concluded in the following points:

- Limited sample population (30 ENSAM – Rabat students).
- Need for more participants interviewed and observed in the internship period.
- Lack of extending research framework to involve other ENSAM students from other Moroccan cities.

However, the research results reveal promising elements to use in future research like extending the research sample to more classes locally, at the ENSAM Rabat, and nationally at other schools or universities other than ENSAM like EST, FST, ENSA, ENCG to name but a few. Therefore, based on the analysis of our data, we propose the following recommendations to enrich future research projects:

- Despite the increasing importance of soft skills, some factors should be fixed through new pedagogical activities like coaching or training.
- A balance between content and language corpuses is the best match to reach positive results for soft skills and employability skills introduced in the Professional English course.
- This target course can be adopted by other vocational schools together with their general English modules.

5. Conclusion

This study has revealed that Moroccan engineering students and graduates require special training while learning various English modules (i.e. vocational English, with soft skills and employability skills) so that they can boost their professional integration in a global labor market, where competition is very keen, especially in STEM fields. Students have great potential especially in soft skills while they still need more work on other skills like language and content, which are linked to their academic achievements and employability.

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