


English as a Complementary Module in Moroccan Universities: Challenges, Practices, and Prospects

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Abstract

This study investigated pedagogical challenges of teaching English as a complementary course in the Moroccan university context. It is based on teachers' and students' perceptions, classroom practices, and institutional constraints. The sample consisted of 120 undergraduate students in law and business programs at the poly-disciplinary faculty of Taza, as well as 10 English instructors in the same context. They responded to a structured questionnaire. Findings reveal that instruction is dominated by grammar-translation and reading comprehension methods, with little use of communicative or discipline-specific activities. Structural limitations (large class sizes, restricted contact hours, and inadequate resources) further hinder effective teaching. Students demonstrate moderate, mainly instrumental motivation, while teachers report insufficient training to adapt English content to the disciplinary needs of their students. These results highlight a misalignment between the course and students' academic contexts, reducing engagement and relevance. The study concludes that reconceptualizing the module as a discipline-sensitive program, integrating authentic materials, communicative approaches, and sustained teacher development, alongside institutional support, is essential to transform English from a peripheral subject into a strategic tool for academic and professional success in Moroccan higher education.

Keywords: Complementary module, English language teaching, ESP, higher education, language policy

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Introduction

In a global world where communication, scientific research, and reading media content are of paramount importance, proficiency in English is unquestionable. It is the lingua franca through which business, news, and knowledge are communicated. Morocco is part of such worldwide interaction, and the country has witnessed a significant shift from French to English (Bekkaoui, 2024; Sekkal & Hida, 2024). Although French has long been a language of instruction, communication, and administration in Morocco, an increasing demand for English has been on the rise (Bekkaoui, 2024), especially among students. According to Sekkal and Hida (2024), this is because English is now a key to global communication and job opportunities. As a result, Moroccan higher education institutions have introduced English as a complementary module, aiming to reach students not majoring in language disciplines, including those in fields such as jurisprudence, commerce, administrative sciences, and the natural sciences. This module endeavors to equip students with the necessary skills needed for academic research, global communication, and job markets. However, scholars in curriculum design argue that the module itself is not effective enough if it is not aligned with students' disciplinary contexts, motivation, and future horizons (Farmati et al., 2022).

Although English is significant for all students, its instruction as a complementary module encounters several obstacles. Mahraj (2019) conducted a needs-analysis study of Moroccan engineering and science students and reported that these students always complain about the gap between what they learn and the job market required skills, such as speaking and writing. In addition, Youssefi (2014) argued that teaching English in higher education institutions faces issues related to mixed-proficiency classes, a lack of adequate materials, and insufficient institutional support. Within this context of controversy and discrepancies between the need for English as a language and the way it is taught, the current endeavor is about English as a complementary module (ECM). The term refers to general English courses offered to non-English majors, such as students of law, economics, and management, to enhance their linguistic competence and academic performance. Unlike English for Specific Purposes (ESP), which focuses on discipline-oriented content (Kadi, 2018), ECM provides broad language support rather than specialized instruction among both students and teachers within the Moroccan higher tertiary education.

Research Questions

The present study is guided by the following research questions:

1. What are the attitudes and motivations of students toward learning English as a complementary module?
2. What challenges do students face in the ECM context?
3. What teaching strategies and challenges do ECM instructors encounter?
4. How do students and teachers perceive the effectiveness of the module in improving English proficiency and academic performance?

By answering these questions, this study aims to contribute to enhanced curriculum design, more effective teaching practices, and stronger institutional support for ECM in Moroccan higher education.

Review of Literature

Higher education in Morocco is influenced by a complex linguistic fabric, where Arabic and French play a dominant role, and English is gradually emerging (Benzehaf, 2021; Bouziane, 2013; Bekou, 2023; Sekkal & Hida, 2024). Administration, teaching, and the job market have historically been using French, but recent research shows a higher awareness among Moroccan students of the importance of English for global prospects.

For instance, Sekkal and Hida (2024) reported that most science postgraduates favored English as a medium of instruction over French, because it is highly demanded in international scholarship and it enhances their chances of getting a job after graduation. Indeed, this shift in language instruction has put a new kind of pressure on institutions of higher education: the demand to include English not just as a "foreign" language in their curricula but as a tool for access, collaboration, and professional development. In this situation, ECMs in non-language specialized faculties become crucial, but their effectiveness depends largely on how well they are integrated in and taught to the multilingual situation of Moroccan universities.

Insights from ESP Research in Morocco

ESP Research in Morocco highlights students' language needs, motivation, and the alignment of current teaching practices with academic and professional requirements. Studies reveal that while students generally hold positive attitudes toward English, they face challenges in acquiring key skills such as speaking and writing. Learners are motivated by career prospects and communication needs, yet curricula often fail to bridge the gap between what students learn and what they require in their disciplines. Proposed solutions include hybrid ESP models that combine general English with discipline-specific tasks, ensuring curriculum alignment and active learner involvement.

Studies, e.g., Mahraj (2019), focused on Moroccan computer engineering students and revealed that although they had positive attitudes toward English, they often face obstacles in acquiring the necessary and main skills, such as speaking and writing. Farmati et al. (2022) explored university students' attitudes towards ESP and concluded that learners have positive attitudes toward English for specific purposes, motivated by both career-oriented and communication reasons. To bridge the gap between what students can learn and what they need, Khatib and Zaidoune (2021) suggested a model for hybrid ESP to be applied to engineering students, stressing that the curriculum should align with the target orientation as well as students' demand for the discipline. They argue that without curriculum linkage, this ESP was generic and learner involvement was limited. These studies bring to the fore three important issues. First, students have positive attitudes towards English, and they recognize its importance. Second, there is a disconnection between the way students learn English and what they need in their future careers. Third, the curriculum lacks the necessary tools and pedagogies that can fulfill students' needs.

Challenges in Teaching ECMs

Teaching ECM in faculties like business, law, and management has brought new challenges. These programs differ from main language courses in several ways. ECMs tend to have fewer hours devoted to instruction, and most of the time, students have an hour and a half session in two weeks, with one week devoted to French and the following to English, as in the Poly-disciplinary Faculty of Taza. The courses taught also often fail to link up closely with what students learn in their main fields. Teachers design courses about basic English rules and vocabulary because they see, as is the case with students, that English is something optional, not truly central to the curriculum. In this regard, Zaidoune and Chroqui (2023) revealed clear expectations among business students. They wanted English lessons to focus on skills like speaking, writing, and everyday communication. Still, plenty of ECMs are stuck to broader topics. They cover general grammar rules and basic reading comprehension. This approach overlooked tasks tied directly to the students' disciplines.

Farmati et al (2022) pointed out important strategies for effective ECMs. They argue that these programs need a significant shift from the idea of English for everyone to English that serves a specific field. In other words, language courses are to be designed

based on what students deal with in their main subjects. However, implementation issues remain salient: mixed-ability classes, limited materials, large class sizes, and insufficient teacher training create obstacles. The hybrid model proposed by Khatib & Zaidoune (2021) is thus instructive: they propose combining general English with discipline-specific tasks and collaborative learning paradigms to better serve engineering students' needs. Khatib and Zaidoune (2021) came up with a hybrid approach. Their idea seems helpful for this situation. They suggest mixing basic English lessons with tasks linked to a discipline. They also include ways for students to work together on things. This approach aims to meet the needs of engineering students in a better way.

ECM brings up issues about how to position it within the broader academic framework. Students often perceive English as less important than their core field of study, which reduces their motivation to learn it (Benrabah, 2014; Bouziane, 2013). When the connection between English and their disciplinary area feels weak, language learning remains peripheral. Effective ECM planning must therefore link language skills to students' academic and professional needs, rather than treating English as an additional or isolated subject (Hutchinson & Waters, 1987; Dudley-Evans & St John, 1998).

Research Gaps and Rationale for the Present Study

Despite valuable insights from North African ESP and ECM literature, two gaps persist in the Moroccan context. First, most studies focus on language or engineering departments, with limited attention to non-language disciplines such as law, management, and business (Amrous & Nejmaoui, 2016; Bekkaoui, 2024; Ennaji, 2005). Second, while motivation and curriculum alignment (Benzehaf, 2021; Chikhaoui, 2019) are frequently discussed, little empirical work examines classroom practices, pedagogical challenges, and teacher perceptions. Addressing these gaps requires a dual perspective that considers both student and teacher views, as ECM success depends on motivation, teaching practices, institutional support, and curriculum integration (Richards, 2015; Shohamy, 2006). The present study aims to fill this gap by exploring these dimensions in Moroccan universities.

Method

The study was conducted in the poly-disciplinary faculty of Taza- Sidi Mohamed Ben Abdelah University, representing diverse academic disciplines such as Law, Business Management, and Economics, where English is taught as a complementary module rather than a core subject, and where English as a separate department has not been created yet. The inclusion of multiple disciplines aimed to ensure variation in instructional practices and student populations, thereby enhancing the reliability and transferability of findings. This study adopts a mixed-method descriptive design integrating both quantitative and qualitative approaches. The choice of this design allows for a comprehensive exploration of teachers' and students' experiences with ECM in Moroccan universities. Quantitative data derived from structured questionnaires provided measurable insights into attitudes, challenges, and teaching strategies, while open-ended responses enriched the analysis with qualitative perspectives. This design is widely employed to combine breadth and depth of understanding (Creswell & Clark, 2018; Dörnyei, 2007).

Participants

Two groups participated in the study: ECM teachers and students enrolled in ECM classes. Concerning teachers as participants, ten instructors (6 male, 4 female) participated. They all held at least a master's degree in English, with teaching experience ranging from 3 to 15 years. As for Students, a total of 120 students (60 from Law and 60 from Business Management faculties) completed the student questionnaire. They were second-year undergraduates aged between 19 and 23, most of whom had studied English for at least

four years prior to university. Participants were selected using purposive sampling to ensure their direct involvement in ECM courses. All participants were informed of the research objectives and gave their consent to participate voluntarily. The researcher had the chance to meet the participants, which facilitated the understanding of questions and their translation into Arabic whenever it was necessary.

Instruments

The teacher questionnaire was designed to gather comprehensive information about instructors' perspectives and classroom practices regarding ECM. It consisted of four main sections. The first section collected demographic information, including gender, academic qualifications, and teaching experience. The second section addressed teachers' perceptions of ECM objectives and curriculum design. The third section focused on teaching strategies and classroom practices, covering the use of communicative activities, instructional materials, and assessment methods. The final section explored challenges and institutional constraints, such as large class sizes, limited access to materials, and student motivation. Most items were structured as Likert-scale statements ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree), supplemented by open-ended questions to capture qualitative insights regarding instructional challenges and potential solutions.

The student questionnaire, designed to complement the teacher survey, comprised five sections. The first section collected demographic and background information, including students' fields of study and years of English study. The second section explored students' attitudes toward learning English as a complementary module. The third section examined motivational factors, distinguishing between instrumental and integrative motivation. The fourth section focused on learning difficulties and perceived weaknesses in English language skills. The final section gathered students' perceptions of teaching methods and classroom engagement, providing a comprehensive overview of their experiences with ECM in Moroccan universities.

Both instruments were adapted from validated ESP and motivation questionnaires used in previous Moroccan and international studies (Farmati et al., 2022; Elouardaoui, 2024). The instruments were piloted with a small group of respondents to ensure clarity, internal consistency, and contextual relevance. Data collection was carried out over six weeks during the second semester of the 2024–2025 academic year. Questionnaires were distributed via Google Forms and as printed copies. Teachers and students were assured of anonymity and confidentiality. Responses were coded manually for quantitative analysis, while open-ended comments were organized thematically.

Data Analysis

The analysis integrates quantitative descriptions and qualitative insights to provide a comprehensive understanding of English teaching and learning as a complementary module. Quantitative data from closed-ended questionnaire items were analyzed using descriptive statistics (frequencies, means, standard deviations), using ChatGPT4, to identify general trends in attitudes, challenges, and instructional strategies. Where relevant, comparative analysis was carried out between disciplines (Law vs. Business Management) to detect differences in student perceptions. Open-ended responses were analyzed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Emerging themes related to teaching challenges, institutional constraints, and suggested improvements were coded manually and triangulated with quantitative findings. This qualitative layer added contextual depth to numerical data and allowed the voices of both teachers and students to be represented authentically. The study adhered to research ethics standards set by Moroccan universities and followed international research ethics guidelines. Participants were informed of the study's purpose, assured of voluntary participation, and could withdraw at any time. No identifying information was collected, and all responses were treated anonymously.

Results and Discussion

This section presents and discusses the results of the study, structured according to the research questions. By aligning the findings with these questions, the presentation clearly demonstrates the relationship between teacher practices, student experiences, and the broader pedagogical and institutional context of English instruction in Moroccan universities.

RQ#1: How do teachers perceive the objectives, curriculum design, and implementation of the English Complementary Module?

The teachers' responses revealed a general agreement regarding the importance of English for university students in non-English disciplines. 80% of the respondents agreed that English plays a pivotal role in enhancing students' employability and access to international academic resources. However, 70% of teachers expressed dissatisfaction with the institutional focus given to the course, arguing that the module is often perceived as secondary rather than essential to students' professional development. The mean score for the item "The complementary English module adequately prepares students for their field of study" was 3.4 out of 5, indicating moderate satisfaction. Qualitative responses further illuminated these views. Teachers emphasized that English teaching as a complementary module suffers from an identity dilemma: it is neither fully communicative nor genuinely tailored to students' disciplinary needs. One teacher noted that "the course lacks a clear objective—students learn general English, but what they really need is English for law and business...etc."

RQ#2: How do students perceive the relevance and effectiveness of English instruction, and what motivational and learning difficulties influence their engagement?

Students' responses indicated both high instrumental motivation and low classroom engagement. Approximately 75% of the students acknowledged the necessity of English for their academic and professional advancement, yet only 45% reported feeling motivated by the content and structure of the current module. 68% of the participants stated that English classes are mostly grammar-oriented, with limited opportunities for interaction or communicative practice, and even if these opportunities are provided, they lack the necessary basic skills to engage in discussions and debate. 55% of students felt that the topics covered in class are disconnected from their majors, while only 20% practiced English outside the university setting. The open-ended questions revealed two recurring themes: the perception of English as a tool for career development, studying abroad, or accessing online resources; and pedagogical dissatisfaction stemming from limited participation, outdated materials, and repetitive exercises. The results confirm Dornyei's (2005) claims that in the EFL context, motivation is sustained when the content taught is perceived by learners as personally relevant and meaningful.

RQ#3: What teaching strategies and classroom practices are employed by instructors, and how are they perceived by students?

Analysis of teachers' pedagogical practices revealed the prevalence of traditional grammar-translation and reading comprehension approaches. Six out of ten teachers (60%) reported relying primarily on translation activities, while only three incorporated communicative or task-based strategies occasionally. None of the respondents indicated using project-based learning or discipline-integrated content due to time constraints and large class sizes. Students' responses confirmed this instructional pattern: 70% reported that classroom instruction focuses mainly on grammar and reading, with minimal speaking practice. This convergence between teacher and student perspectives indicates a methodological gap between communicative language teaching principles and their

actual implementation in Moroccan higher education. Previous studies' findings on EFL teaching in Moroccan universities have also documented persistent reliance on traditional approaches and a lack of pedagogical innovation (Barkat, 2020; El Khatabi, 2018).

RQ# 4: What challenges and institutional constraints affect the implementation of the English Complementary Module?

Both teachers and students identified various challenges affecting the effectiveness of the complementary English module. As shown in Table 1, the most frequently cited issues were limited class hours, overcrowded classrooms, and insufficient teaching materials. Teachers highlighted institutional neglect, noting the absence of a clear framework for syllabus design, assessment, or professional development. Many reported receiving no formal training in ESP or needs analysis methodologies (Kadi, 2018), which limits their ability to adapt teaching to students' disciplinary requirements. It is worth noting here that all teachers of English in this faculty are part-time, with two teachers being associate professors. This remark itself indicates a higher demand for English in Moroccan higher education institutions and implies the teachers' experience in teaching English in middle and high schools. The body of instructors includes well-experienced teachers, inspectors, and teachers with higher university degrees.

Table 1. Challenges for Teaching ECM in the Moroccan Universities

Challenge	Teachers Reporting (%)	Students Reporting (%)
Limited class hours	90	82
Large class size	80	75
Lack of relevant materials	70	68
Low motivation	60	72
Lack of institutional support	60	

Students, by contrast, stressed pedagogical monotony, limited classroom interaction, and exam-oriented instruction as key demotivating factors. These issues collectively point to a structural marginalization of the English module within the broader university curriculum. Therefore, there are practical and institutional barriers that hinder the effective implementation of English as a complementary module.

Half of the teachers in this study (50%) stated that they had never attended any workshops or training sessions related to teaching English for non-English majors. This lack of professional development has implications for instructional quality and curriculum adaptation. Teachers recommended that universities establish collaborative curriculum design committees bringing together English instructors and disciplinary faculty members from law and business programs. Such collaboration could ensure that English courses reflect authentic communicative situations relevant to students' fields.

The findings reveal a multidimensional picture of ECM in Moroccan universities. Both quantitative and qualitative data indicate that while teachers and students share a strong recognition of the vital importance of English, its pedagogical implementation and institutional positioning remain limited and inconsistent. English is widely acknowledged as an essential skill for professional and academic advancement, particularly within fields such as law and business management, yet it continues to occupy a peripheral role within university curricula. This contradiction between perceived importance and institutional practice represents a central challenge shaping the teaching and learning of English in Moroccan higher education.

From the teachers' perspective, the data suggests a clear awareness of English's relevance to students' disciplinary and professional growth. However, this awareness faces structural and institutional barriers, including insufficient class hours, inadequate

instructional materials, and a lack of a tailored syllabus that addresses students' specific needs. Teachers also reported limited opportunities for professional development in areas such as ESP and communicative language teaching, which hinders their capacity to adapt instructional content to students' academic fields. The module is often reduced to a general English course rather than a targeted language program linked to disciplinary literacy. Teachers also justify their pedagogical choices by the fact that they try to match what they teach with the courses available for students on the language learning platform Rosetta Stone. Teachers attempt to make a match between what they teach in class and what students are required to learn and achieve on the platform, as they must spend a certain number of hours on it so that they can pass the module successfully.

Students' responses reinforce these observations. Their engagement in classroom activities remains low despite their motivation, driven by employability opportunities, global communication, and academic research, to learn English. The prevailing pedagogical model, characterized by traditional teaching practices and reading comprehension exercises, fails to provide sufficient opportunities for interactive and communicative learning. This does not imply that teachers cannot prepare engaging activities, but due to the mixed-ability classes and students' engagement levels in English courses, as stated in their responses, opportunities remain limited. As a result, students perceive English instruction as mismatched to their academic specializations and real-world communication needs, which in turn affects their intrinsic motivation.

A further issue emerging from the data concerns institutional neglect and marginalization of the English module. Both teachers and students emphasized that English is treated as an auxiliary subject rather than a core component of the academic curriculum. This institutional stance manifests in large class sizes, overloaded schedules, and a lack of resources or support for curriculum development. Such constraints contribute to what can be described as pedagogical stagnation, where teachers rely on traditional methods not out of preference, but necessity.

With all these findings, the study demonstrates a recurring disparity between English significance and its marginalized position in curriculum design, which is consistent with larger trends seen in other non-Anglophone contexts (Dörnyei, 2005). The pedagogical influence of English is compromised by its institutional status as a complementary subject. Teachers' complaints about insufficient class time, lack of resources, and lack of institutional support suggest that the course operates within a structurally limited framework. In this regard, Barkat (2020) confirms that ESP and complementary English courses are often considered by Moroccan university teachers to be secondary to core disciplinary modules. This marginalization adds to what is known as institutional inertia, as language teaching is kept separate from the broader academic goals of the university.

The lack of structured collaboration between English teachers and faculty members specializing in different disciplines prevents the development of context-specific curricula that could meet linguistic and disciplinary needs. Hutchinson and Waters (1987) argue that the effectiveness of specialized English courses or additional English courses depends on a thorough analysis of needs and the integration of subject-specific content. The present findings confirm that this integration remains limited in Moroccan universities, resulting in teaching practices that prioritize grammatical accuracy at the expense of communicative or subject-related skills.

The findings showed a heavy reliance on conventional teaching methods, especially for reading comprehension and grammar. Teachers' lack of access to specialized training in communicative or needs-based techniques, as well as educational stagnation, are the main reasons this methodological approach endures. Indeed, while many Moroccan English as a foreign language instructors are aware of the fundamentals of

communication, they are unable to completely use them due to institutional and practical issues like packed classrooms and set curricula.

According to the students, there are few opportunities for meaningful communication and poor involvement because of this instructional approach. Students believe that classroom activities are unrelated to real-world applications, even if they understand that English is crucial to their career success. This disparity supports Dörnyei's (2005) claim that perceived relevance and authenticity of classroom activities are closely related to motivation in language acquisition. Learners' motivation tends to decrease when what they are learning does not align with their academic and professional objectives. This study supports the integration of authentic materials and communicative activities linked to students' disciplinary fields, such as law and business. This shift would enhance not only linguistic proficiency but also students' ability to access and articulate domain-specific knowledge in English.

Implications

The findings have broader implications for Moroccan higher education policy. They call for greater policy attention and resource allocation. The current implementation of English instruction does not fully reflect its strategic value within Morocco's higher education system. Teachers' responses revealed that English courses are constrained by limited time allocation, large class sizes, and the absence of discipline-specific materials. These factors restrict instructors to traditional teaching methods such as grammar-translation and reading comprehension, which fail to foster communicative competence or critical language awareness. Similarly, students' feedback indicated moderate motivation levels, driven more by external (instrumental) than intrinsic factors. This suggests that while students recognize the practical necessity of English, they struggle to find relevance and engagement in current course content and pedagogy. The findings highlight the need to reconceptualize the complementary English module from a remedial, general-purpose course into a contextually grounded and field-oriented program.

Old teaching methods are still common, and without a more systematic improvement in English teaching, efforts to make Moroccan universities more international and to improve graduates' job prospects remain a desire. Effective improvements would require a complete overhaul of the curriculum and the recognition of English as a strategic, rather than merely complementary, element of academic success. English instructors require ongoing professional development in ESP methodology, syllabus design, and digital pedagogy to effectively adapt their teaching to students' needs. Collaborative curriculum planning between language and subject specialists should become standard practice, ensuring that English instruction contributes directly to disciplinary learning outcomes. Without such reforms, Moroccan universities risk falling behind in the global academic and professional landscape, where English is playing an increasingly important role.

Conclusion

This study examined the challenges and pedagogical realities of teaching ECM in Moroccan universities, with a focus on teachers' and students' perceptions, classroom practices, and institutional conditions. The study concludes that the effectiveness of the ECM in Moroccan universities depends on (a) pedagogical innovation, emphasizing communicative and task-based approaches; (b) curricular integration, aligning English instruction with disciplinary goals; and (c) institutional support, providing training, materials, and recognition for language education as a key component of higher learning. If implemented, these measures could transform English from a peripheral subject into a strategic instrument of academic and professional empowerment, aligning Moroccan higher education with global standards of linguistic competence and employability.

Limitations of the study include its focus on a single university faculty, which may limit the generalizability of the findings to other Moroccan higher education contexts. Additionally, the study relied solely on self-reported questionnaires from teachers and students, without classroom observations or longitudinal data to track changes over time. Suggestions for further research involve extending the investigation to multiple universities across Morocco, incorporating additional qualitative methods such as interviews or classroom observations, and examining the impact of integrated English instruction on actual academic performance and professional outcomes.

Disclosure Statement

I (the author of this paper) hereby declare that research ethics and citing principles have been considered in all the stages of this paper. I take full responsibility for the content of the paper in case of a dispute. I confirm that the manuscript has been created by the author(s) and not an AI tool/Large Language Model (LLM).

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