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ESP TESTING IN THE EYES OF POLISH TERTIARY TEACHERS

ABSTRACT

The field of ESP language testing seems to represent significant challenges for trainers. The challenges frequently lie in developing reliable assessment tools, balancing background knowledge and language proficiency in ESP tests, or choosing specific language skills and competencies which ought to be tested in particular fields of academic or professional activity. The aim of this article is to report on a study conducted among ESP teachers practising in a number of educational institutions in Poland. The research sought to investigate what challenges ESP teachers face in designing tests in the context of the subject specific approach in foreign language instruction.

Key words: EPS testing, tertiary education, challenges, Polish ESP teachers, tertiary language courses

ABSTRAKT

**TESTOWANIE W JĘZYKU SPECJALISTYCZNYM Z PERSPEKTYWY POLSKICH NAUCZYCIELI
UCZELNI WYŻSZYCH**

Testowanie znajomości języków specjalistycznych stanowi znaczne wyzwanie dla nauczy-
cieli pracujących na uczelniach wyższych, co wynika z potrzeby opracowania odpowied-
nich narzędzi oceny wiadomości językowych i specjalistycznych w obszarze języka spec-
jalistycznego. Dodatkową trudność stanowi wybór konkretnych umiejętności i kompetencji
językowych, które powinny być testowane w poszczególnych dziedzinach działalności
akademickiej lub zawodowej. Celem niniejszego artykułu jest przedstawienie badania
przeprowadzonego wśród nauczycieli angielskiego języka specjalistycznego praktykujących
w wielu instytucjach edukacyjnych w Polsce, mającego określić trudności i wyzwania
stojące w zakresie testowania znajomości języków specjalistycznych.

Słowa kluczowe: testowanie w nauczaniu języka angielskiego specjalistycznego, wyzwania,
polscy nauczyciele języka angielskiego specjalistycznego, kursy języka specjalistycznego na
uczelniach wyższych

1. Assessment, evaluation and testing in ESP

Assessment, evaluation, and testing are divergent concepts in foreign lan-
guage teaching. However, a combination of their different focuses is crucial for
teachers to gain information about their learners and highlight the gap between
English for General Purposes (EGP) and English for Specific Supposes (ESP)
teaching. ESP is more practical and object-oriented as compared with EGP.

Assessment is considered an integral part of the teaching-learning process,
providing key information about students' individual needs and their learn-
ing progress. It is a process that answers such questions as: How much have
students learned? How do they learn in general? The first question can be an-
swered using different kinds of tests (treated as products), and the latter using
observations, surveys, interviews or portfolios[1]. Douglas[2] defines the main aim
of assessment in ESP as gaining evidence to understand the effectiveness of
the course. Evaluation, however, refers to the analysis of information provided
by assessment in order to make judgements and determine further steps in the
teaching process. Finally, testing, a basic tool of assessment in ESP, is present
at various stages of the ESP course in the following forms[3]:

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[1] N.-F. Bucur, C. Neagu, "*The limits of ESP tests*, Challenges of the Knowledge Society" 2015, 5 (1),
s. 898.

[2] D. Douglas, *ESP and Assessment*, [w:] *The Handbook of English for Specific Purposes*, B. Paltridge,
S. Starfield (red.), Oxford 2013, s. 367.

[3] H. Komorowska, *Metody nauczania języków obcych*, Warszawa: Fraszka edukacyjna 2009, s. 243.

– Placement tests (at the beginning of the course, estimate the initial level of students' competence; in ESP they are often combined with needs analysis in order to tailor the content of the course to the needs of the students);
– Achievement tests (tests administered at any time during the course, aim to review the content of the course and check the level of retention of course content);
– Proficiency tests (assess learners' readiness to cope with the implementation of acquired knowledge in authentic situations).

For the needs of the present paper, only achievement and proficiency tests are taken into consideration.

2. Characteristics of ESP tests

A rewiev of the literature suggests that ESP tests should have the following qualities:

Authenticity

Undeniably, ESP testing should reflect the initial aims of the course and the participants' needs[4]. In ESP testing the main emphasis should also be put on the evaluation of skills that can be applied in professional practice. Therefore, Sendur and Gajewska[5] opt for an evaluation maximally approximate in shape to the authentic linguistic actions, as well as to those actions used by experts in terms of acceptability and professional communicative efficacy. As Bucur and Neagu[6] observe:

> Considering the most important factor affecting the quality of an ESP test, the level of authenticity, ideally, an ESP test should engage the test takers in accomplishing various genuine tasks through which their general English knowledge (linguistic competence) could interact with their ESP content knowledge in a real life context[7].

Specialist knowledge

Douglas[8] reflects on the following fundamentals of ESP testing: the analysis of learners' target language uses, authentic communicative situations and

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[4]   M. A. Sendur, E. Gajewska, *Ocenianie w nauczaniu języków obcych zorientowanym na cele ogólne a ocenianie w nauczaniu zorientowanym na cele zawodowe*, "Języki Obce w szkole" 2015, 3, s. 49–51.

[5]   Ibidem s. 52–53.

[6]   N.-F. Bucur, C. Neagu, *The limits of ESP...*, s. 900.

[7]   Ibidem.

[8]   D. Douglas, *ESP and Assessment...*, s. 367–368.

specialist knowledge. Language use varies according to the context; however, language for specific purposes is very precise. Additionally, there is an inter-action between language for specific purposes and background knowledge for specific purposes[9]. It results from the authentic situations in which language learners need to combine language ability with field-specific knowledge.

Context

ESP tests vary between different disciplines, topics or themes, or level of language specificity. Nevertheless, contextual foundations are a common value. Omaggio[10] suggests a "hybrid approach to test design" in which not only lexis and grammar are tested, but also elements of a particular discourse. Grygiel[11] also opts for a hybrid solution in teaching Business English:

A hybrid phenomenon, Business English requires a hybrid methodology. Unlike business discourse, it cannot be limited only to the analysis of authentic data, because this could result in a bias toward spontaneous, naturally occurring uses, sometimes marginal and unimportant for the overall model of Business English and its core characteristics[12].

3. Research aim

The aim of the research was to survey Polish ESP teachers employed in a number of institutions of higher education, and to seek their opinions on ESP assessment. The pilot and the present studies were guided by the following research questions:
1. How often do ESP teachers administer tests during a single year of a two-year language course?
2. What skills and knowledge are most frequently tested by ESP teachers?
3. How do ESP teachers perceive the difficulty of ESP testing?
4. What kinds of tests do ESP teachers use?
5. What difficulties do ESP teachers face while designing tests?
6. Do ESP teachers feel the need to cooperate with content teachers while designing and marking tests?
7. Should ESP teachers test content knowledge as well as language skills?

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[9] Ibidem, s. 368.

[10] A.C. Omaggio, *Teaching Language in Context. Proficiency-Oriented Instruction*, Boston, Mass. 1986.

[11] M. Grygiel, *In Search of a Theory of Business English*, [w:] *LSP Perspectives*, B. Kepska-Borkowska, G. Gwóźdź, P. Mamet (red.), Dąbrowa Górnicza 2015, s. 83.

[12] Ibidem, s. 83.

8. Should factual errors resulting from inadequate subject knowledge affect students' grades?

These eight questions formed the basis for a pilot questionnaire which was administered to a group of 56 ESP teachers representing six institutions of higher education in Poland. The self-reporting questionnaire was written in Polish and contained mainly closed questions. An open question was added to questions 3 to 11 (with the exception of question 7, see Appendix) so that the respondents could provide their own answers. The first part of the questionnaire included background information, age, the length of ESP teaching experience, and the type of ESP taught. The second part of the questionnaire was devoted to various aspects of ESP assessment.

The main conclusions from the pilot study were as follows:

– The respondents thought that ESP testing is more difficult than EGP testing, and that the most challenging areas to test are vocabulary, speaking and writing.
– They did not see the need to cooperate with content specialists while designing and marking tests.
– They had polarized opinions on whether ESP teachers ought to assess content knowledge, and whether factual errors should affect students' grades.

4. The main study

For the main study, the sample was extended to include ESP teachers from a wider variety of tertiary education institutions. The questionnaire itself was revised in light of the pilot study. Moreover, the paper-based questionnaire from the pilot study was converted into an electronic questionnaire by a Polish branch of Oxford University Press (OUP), and the survey was conducted online among tertiary ESP teachers drawn from the OUP database.

There were 91 respondents in the present study, 90 of whom teach ESP at the tertiary level. The most numerous group (32 respondents) comprised teachers with between 6 and 10 years of teaching experience in this area. The second most numerous group (16 respondents) had between 11 and 15 years of ESP teaching experience, and the third most numerous group (15 respondents) – between 0 and 5 years of teaching experience in this field. The remaining respondents represented a variety of length of ESP teaching experience.

The participants of the research taught a wide range of ESP varieties:

– Business English: 46 respondents
– Technical English: 43 respondents
– Medical English: 32 respondents
– Legal English: 9 respondents

Apart from the types of ESP provided by the authors of the questionnaire, 24 respondents indicated other varieties they taught, including: English for Pedagogics, English for Psychology, Military English, English for Police Officers, etc. The obtained data suggest that one person taught more than one type of ESP even within one institution.

The results of the research were profiled according to the type of ESP taught in order to see whether it influences teachers' approach to ESP testing.

A number of respondents omitted some of the questions. Nevertheless, such questionnaires were not rejected, but were included in the analysis of those questions to which the respondents had provided answers so as to retain a significant sample size. Individual questions are not strongly interdependent, and therefore omitting some of them does not diminish the value of the remaining answers. In the analysis of results for each question the number of viable answers is stated, while the number of empty answers is omitted.

5. Study results

The first research question concerned the frequency of ESP testing. The data show that regardless of the type of ESP taught, the majority of respondents gave tests to their students 2 or 3 times a semester. This means that tests are administered relatively frequently, especially when one takes into account the fact that tertiary teachers in Poland have at their disposal fifteen 90-minute meetings per semester.
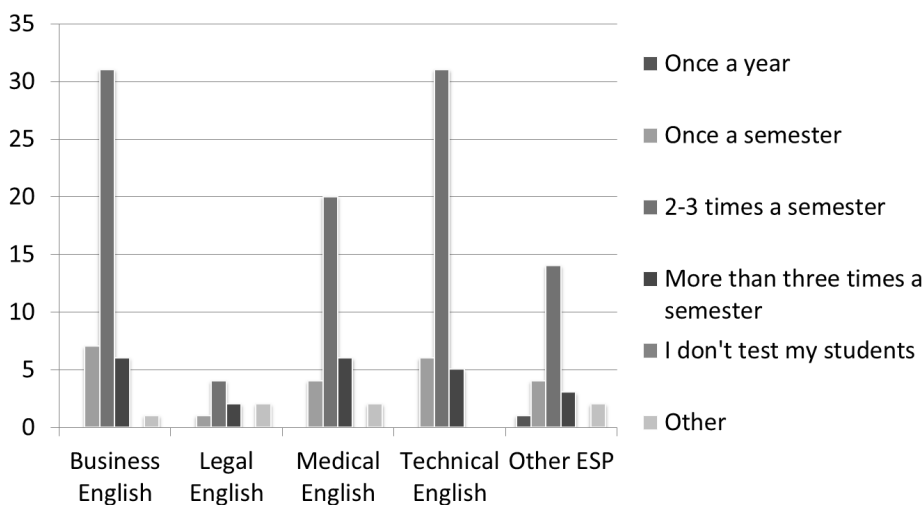

Figure 1. Frequency of ESP testing

In the answers provided to the open part of this question some respondents stated that the frequency of testing depended on the group they taught and the institution they worked for. Other teachers observed that they tested their students every two weeks, but they did not provide any further explanation.

The second research question concerned the skills and knowledge the respondents focused on while testing. The results revealed that teachers of Business English, Legal English, and Medical English primarily tested knowledge of specialist vocabulary, followed by the ability to read specialist texts, and grammar skills. Teachers of Technical English also designed tasks which emphasised students' knowledge of specialist vocabulary and their ability to read professional texts. However, their third most popular answer was testing students' listening skills.
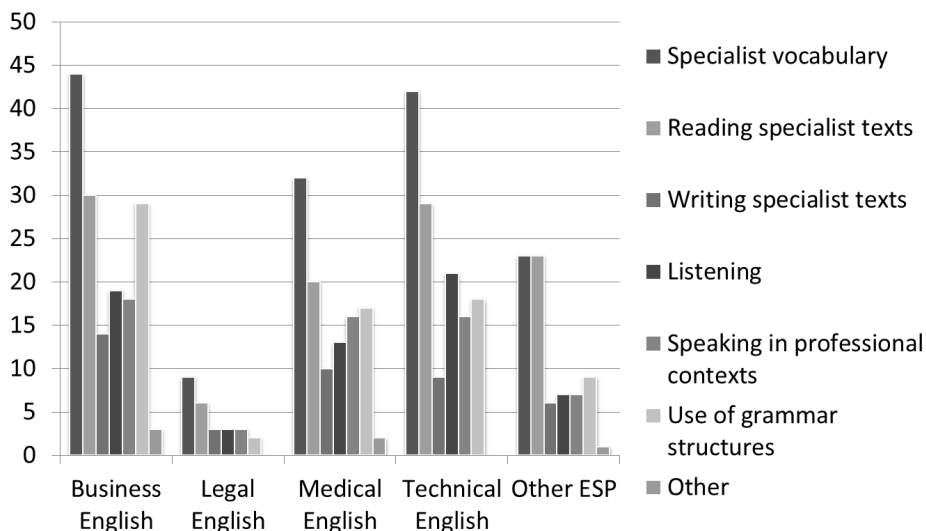

Figure 2. Most frequently tested skills and knowledge

Interestingly, in the open part of this question some teachers added that they tested students' knowledge of general vocabulary and expressions necessary for effective small talk. This might suggest that the courses they conducted were not entirely devoted to ESP. The third research question concerned teachers' opinions on the difficulty of ESP testing. Regardless of the type of ESP taught, the majority of respondents in each group stated that ESP testing is more difficult than EGP testing.

This might be due to the fact that the majority of teachers in each group most frequently used self-produced tests (research question 4). Furthermore, in response to the open part of the question on the kinds of tests used, some
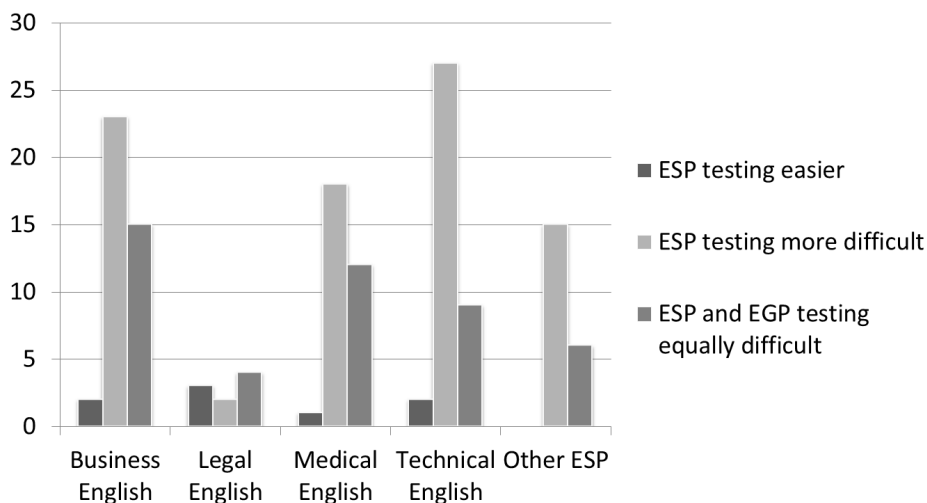
Figure 3. Difficulty of ESP testing
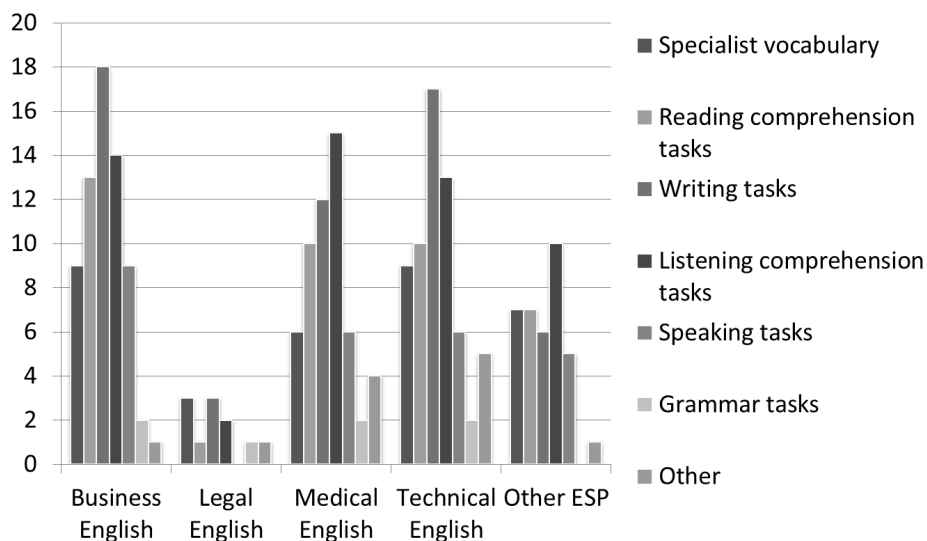
Figure 4. Difficulties in designing ESP test tasks

study participants observed that they used only those tests which were designed by them from scratch, as there were no testing tools available for the courses they taught. One person observed that since they designed the course themselves, they also had to prepare the tests. As regards difficulties in preparing ESP test tasks (research question 5), the results indicate that for Business

and Technical English teachers the most problematic tasks to design were, in order of difficulty: writing, listening comprehension and reading comprehension. For Medical English teachers the biggest challenge was designing listening comprehension tasks, followed by writing and reading comprehension tasks.

Legal English teachers found designing vocabulary and writing test tasks equally demanding, which might be the result of the specific language used by legal professionals. Similarly to Business, Medical and Technical English teachers, writing tasks were one of the top three challenges Legal English teachers faced while preparing tests. Interestingly, teachers of other types of ESP considered preparing writing tasks problematic, but contrary to other respondents their set of three main challenges also included vocabulary. In response to the open part of this question, some respondents stated none of the aspects suggested by the authors of the questionnaire seemed difficult to them. However, one Medical teacher wrote that each branch of medicine uses different specialist vocabulary which they had to master in order to be able to prepare tests for different groups they worked with. Another Medical English teacher stated that they had no access to professional literature, and that is why designing ESP tasks was hard for them. One of the Technical English teachers indicated that they were not up to date with the latest scientific developments which prove facts in course books to be outdated. For that reason they found it problematic to design tasks related to students' specialist knowledge.

Lack of specialist knowledge does not seem to be a factor contributing to the difficulties that ESP professionals might have while preparing test tasks. When asked whether they felt the need to cooperate with content specialists while designing tests and assessing their students (research question 6), the majority of the respondents indicated that they did not consider it necessary. However, in the answers provided to the open part of this question some respondents argued that such cooperation might be useful when it comes to preparing test questions. One of the respondents observed that they conducted language rather than CLIL lessons, and that is why they tried not to assess students' specialist knowledge. Another respondent argued that cooperation between language and subject teachers would be more beneficial for in-service professionals who want to broaden their language knowledge rather than for the students they taught.

The respondents were asked whether ESP teachers should test, apart from language skills, also content knowledge (research question 7). The opinions differ across the groups. The majority of Business and Medical English teachers thought testing content knowledge should be one of the tasks of language teachers. On the other hand, Technical English teachers and teachers of other types of ESP indicated that language practitioners ought not to check how well students know specialist concepts. As regards Legal English teachers, half of

them shared the opinions of Business and Medical English teachers and the second half agreed with Technical English teachers and teachers of other types of ESP. In the answers provided to the open part of this question some respondents added that the two aspects cannot be separated, as the boundary between language skills and content knowledge can be blurred. One of the respondents observed that language teachers should not test content knowledge, as one person is not able to have specialised knowledge in several areas. Finally, the respondents were asked whether factual errors resulting from inadequate factual knowledge should affect students' grades (research question 8). The data revealed that an overwhelming majority of teachers in each group thought that factual errors should not lower students' grades.

In the answers provided to the open part of this question some respondents added that factual errors ought to negatively affect students' grades, but they did not elaborate on it. One respondent argued that the final grade should be lowered when students have made factual errors, especially when ESP is taught.

6. Conclusions

Unlike the pilot study, the main research results were profiled according to the type of ESP taught. However, the data revealed no significant differences between various groups of teachers, with the exception of the questions concerning difficulties in designing ESP test tasks and testing content knowledge. Therefore, it might be assumed that Polish tertiary language teachers face similar difficulties and share similar opinions on ESP testing regardless of the variety of ESP they teach. However, since they are likely to teach more than one variety of ESP, this might explain the lack of differences.

The data obtained in the present study also indicated that the majority of respondents administered tests relatively frequently, and that they primarily tested the knowledge of specialist vocabulary, followed by the ability to read specialist texts, and knowledge of grammar (with the exception of Technical English teachers, who tested the knowledge of specialist vocabulary, reading skills and listening skills). The data lead us to believe that these are the skills and knowledge that the teachers emphasised most during their language courses, as it is highly unlikely that they would test different aspects than they teach. Furthermore, this may indicate that they believe these particular skills to be the most important in students' future professional lives. However, more studies would be needed to further research these questions.

Interestingly, some answers provided by the respondents to an open part of this research question suggest that their courses are not entirely devoted to ESP.

It would be worth researching what aspects of EGP, and why, the respondents include in their courses.

The majority of the respondents think that ESP testing is more difficult than EGP testing. This opinion might have its roots in the fact that the respondents most frequently use self-produced tests, which is unsurprising as there is a shortage of ready-made tests for various types of ESP that could be adequately adapted to a given testing context.

The difficulties in designing ESP tests do not seem to lie in the respondents' lack of specialist knowledge either, as the majority of them do not need to cooperate with a content specialist while designing tests and assessing students. Thus, it might be assumed that the respondents' tests do not contain highly specialised concepts. The question is, however, how willing content specialists would be to cooperate with language teachers, and whether such cooperation would change the number of specialised concepts in tests.

Research results showed that the majority of respondents think that factual errors ought not to negatively affect students' grades, which indicates that during a language course students are not required to have advanced specialist knowledge. However, the respondents' answers differ regarding the question of whether specialist knowledge should be tested in language tests. On the one hand, this might mean that some teachers find it difficult to set the boundary between language skills and specialist knowledge. On the other hand, perhaps, teachers who think that content knowledge should not be tested work with the kind of specialised content which is easier to separate from students' professional knowledge.

Interestingly, each group of the respondents, apart from the teachers of other types of ESP, included writing in their set of the three most difficult aspects to test. In view of such opinions it is predictable that writing would be one of the skills least frequently tested by the respondents (see Figure 2). It happens because it is objectively difficult to grade a piece of written discourse. Moreover, writing is a very time-consuming activity, which is why special criteria should be developed to shorten the time of production and assessment of it. The problem is compounded by the fact that teachers usually do not write specialist texts themselves, and are probably uncertain what such texts should look like.

Another reason why the respondents perceive a given aspect as demanding to test might be the lack of appropriate materials, e.g. audio materials that could be adapted for their testing needs. Moreover, knowledge of specialist vocabulary means that language teachers need to understand specialist concepts hidden behind definitions. Language teachers need to be particularly careful while preparing a vocabulary test task so as not to make factual errors which would

make it impossible for students even with a good mastery of English to perform the task. The discussed issue is a new and unexplored field that needs further research, and has the potential to create new opportunities for the development of tools enhancing the efficacy of testing in ESP.

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Appendix

Research questionnaire

1. Please indicate your age:
    a) 20–25
    b) 26–30

   c) 31–35
   d) 36–40
   e) 41–45
   f) 46–50
   g) 51–55
   h) 56–60
   i) 61+
2. Please indicate your ESP teaching experience:
   a) 0–5 years
   b) 6–10 years
   c) 11–15 years
   d) 16–20 years
   e) 21–25 years
   f) 26 and more years
3. Please indicate the type of ESP you teach:
   a) Legal English
   b) Business English
   c) Medical English
   d) Technical English
   e) Other, what? ....
4. How often do you administer tests?
   a) once a year
   b) once a semester
   c) 2–3 times a semester
   d) more than 3 times a semester
   e) I don't administer tests
   f) other, what? ....
5. What skills and knowledge do you most frequently test? (*You can indicate more than one option*)
   a) knowledge of specialist vocabulary
   b) reading specialist texts
   c) writing specialists texts
   d) listening skills
   e) speaking in professional contexts
   f) use of grammar
   g) other, what? ....
6. Which of the following statements do you agree with most?
   a) ESP testing is easier than EGP testing.
   b) ESP testing is more difficult than EGP testing.
   c) ESP testing is as difficult as EGP testing.

7. Which of the following statements do you agree with most?
   a) I use ready-made tests more frequently than self-produced tests.
   b) I use self-produced tests more frequently than ready-made tests.
   c) I use self-produced tests and ready-made tests equally frequently.
   d) I usually use tests provided by the publisher of the course book I use.
   e) other, what? . . . .

8. In my opinion, the most challenging ESP test tasks to prepare are the following: *(You can indicate more than one option)*
   a) tasks testing knowledge of specialist vocabulary
   b) specialist reading tasks
   c) specialist writing tasks
   d) specialist listening tasks
   e) tasks testing speaking skills in professional contexts
   f) grammar tasks
   g) other, what? . . . .

9. Do you feel the need to cooperate with a content specialist while designing test tasks and testing students?
   a) Yes
   b) No
   c) I don't know
   d) other, what? . . . .

10. Should ESP teachers, apart from general language skills and knowledge, also test specialist knowledge?
   a) yes
   b) no
   c) I don't know
   d) other, what? . . . .

11. Should factual errors resulting from students' inadequate content knowledge affect students' overall test grade?
   a) yes
   b) no
   c) I don't know
   d) other, what? . . . .