AN ANALYSIS OF IMPLEMENTATION CHALLENGES
FOR ENGLISH FOR SPECIFIC PURPOSES (ESP) FORMATIVE ASSESSMENT
VIA BLENDED LEARNING MODE AT CHINESE VOCATIONAL POLYTECHNICS

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Abstrak

In the midst of the current digital learning era, traditional assessment has gradually shifted over prioritizing summative assessment towards equally emphasizing formative assessment within blended learning mode. However, there are still limited studies that investigate the implementation of formative assessment via blended learning mode in China particularly looking at the situation at Chinese vocational polytechnics. To explore actual formative assessment practices, a qualitative case study was conducted at two vocational polytechnics and experienced ESP teachers were selected as participants. Rich data were collected through rounds of semi-structured interviews and document analysis and emerging themes from the elicited and analysed data show five categories of challenges. The findings revealed that though most ESP teachers perceived formative assessment as an effective and fair way to monitor students' learning process, there are still challenges that must be mitigated especially when implemented via online platforms. The challenges come in the form of difficulty in following ESP assessment principles, limited training and absence of guidelines, large class size, and students' lack of motivation influence their assessment practices. This study justifies the need to develop explicit guidelines for best practices in ESP formative assessment for teachers' reference.

Keywords: ESP, formative assessment, blended learning, best practices

1. INTRODUCTION

Tertiary education has a significant role in the progress of any country and this requires higher education institutions to be well-prepared towards assisting undergraduates meet their future workplace needs and face the real-world job challenges (Ahmad, et. al. 2017). Due to this, the quality of tertiary curriculum delivered and the assessments administered are very essential. So far, few studies have been found on implementing formative assessment (FA) via blended learning mode at Chinese vocational polytechnics. Due to this, this study aims to focus on the practices of implementing formative assessment via blended learning mode for English for Specific Purposes (ESP) courses like Business English at Chinese vocational polytechnics and the challenges that arise throughout the process. Generally as reported in literature, there are a number of issues that revolve around formative assessment practices by ESP teachers. Basically, ESP teachers' assessment practices are relatively unknown despite a series of national policies promoting blended learning and formative assessment have been

issued in China years ago. Both good practices and challenges unearthed from this study could have significant implications for ESP pedagogical instructions and its effective FA practices.

On one hand, with the advent and wide application of digital learning in tertiary education, blended learning mode has shown its benefits in improving learners' performance and motivation (Arifani, Khaja, Suryanti, & Wardhono, 2019), the motivational impact of traditional assessment modes has been questioned (Muho & Taraj, 2022). On the other hand, with its different nature from English for General Purposes (EGP), ESP assessment follows its own specific assessment principles, making the direct transfer of assessment practices for EGP to ESP without proper guidance, a challenging task. Moreover, the public outcry and employers' complaint of business English graduates' incompetent communication in authentic context have made ESP assessment by teachers seemingly more burdensome. Consequently, ESP teachers have to face and mitigate the challenges to implement desired assessment practices to meet learners' pedagogical needs and the objectives of stakeholders. Considering the fact that the scale of higher vocational education accounts for half of China's higher education (Lin, 2022), insights and implications gained from this study will be of greater significance for the higher vocational education field.

Due to globalization and economic integration, the demand for international communications via English language have dramatically increased. The demand for graduates having communicative competence and mastery of lingua franca like English has spiked due to rapid growth in businesses and economic activities around the world (Ahmad, et.al, 2019). International talents with a good command and competency in English have become the strategic resources for companies to achieve growth and in some cases for students to win international competitions (Yang, Chen, Liu, & Du, 2023). Thus, good ability of using English in specific fields is urgently demanded by employers (Buzarna-Tihenea, 2021) and proficiency in performing workplace tasks through English has evolved into a crucial reference to employ graduates by companies (Ahmad Tajuddin, 2015). Frequent assertions have been made by linguistics scholars that in content-specific domain, a language specific curriculum and assessment will provide more reliable indicators of language skills and communication abilities than a general-purpose language course (Ahmad, et.al, 2021)

To a large extent, the lack of professional skills and communicative competency may probably result in graduates' unemployment and difficulties in career growth. In the context of China, higher requirement is put on vocational polytechnics via new orientation by attaching more importance to students' professional skill acquisition. In the new era of digital learning with advanced educational technology and a variety of online resources available, ESP teaching assessment practices and the overall quality of Business English programs will be doubted by parents, employers and the public if graduates' communicative competency remains at an unsatisfactory level.

Hill and McNamara (2012) pointed out both ESP teachers' difficulties in following ESP assessment principles and underlying reasons for practices. Besides following general language assessment principles, ESP assessment will have to follow specificity and authenticity principles (Douglas, 2000). Valid ESP assessments have to measure not only learners' general language ability, but also measure their skills in certain field-specified context (Nagy & Warta, 2021). In digital learning era, traditional assessment mode has been seriously challenged as blended learning has shown its effectiveness in motivating students' classroom engagement. However, In-service teachers' lack of online assessment literacy have been detected (Moorhouse, 2021). Teachers' insufficient

language assessment literacy (LAL) may lead to teachers' being unable to conduct accurate assessment, inaccurate interpretation of test results, which will have negative impact on students (Weng & Shen, 2022).

It is apparent that all these imply the fact that ESP FA practices in many countries including in China seems to be a tough issue as assessment via blended learning becomes more challenging. Therefore, it is urgently needed to explore ESP teachers' FA process at Chinese vocational polytechnics and identify possible challenges and issues they face.

Research Questions

This study explores the underlying issues and challenges in ESP teachers' FA practices via blended learning at Chinese vocational polytechnics for Business English major students. The research questions are as follows:

1. What are the challenges faced by ESP teachers in implementing FA via blended learning?
2. What are the underlying causes of the challenges in FA implementation via blended learning?
3. How do the ESP teachers mitigate the challenges?

2. METHODOLOGY

This qualitative study incorporated a detailed case study approach on ten ESP teachers from Business English program at two Chinese vocational polytechnics which were made as key sites. Semi-structured interviews and document analysis were used to collect data. These purposive samples of ten teachers were selected due to their rich work experience and relevant involvement in ESP curriculum teaching and assessing process. The interview questions focused on ESP FA practices which these teachers implemented to explore aspects related to teachers' perceptions of the ESP FA, blended learning and the challenges that they encountered. Findings were also drawn from triangulated information from the analysis of documents including course syllabus, teaching design with specific assessment method, students' assignments, online quiz items, students' discussion online, and teachers' self-reflection. All the interviews were recorded, transcribed verbatim, coded and analysed for emerging themes. The analysis process incorporates open coding, axial coding, selective coding and thematic analysis of the elicited interview data and document analysis notes. The types of challenges, underlying reasons for it to happen and the types of mitigation undertaken are critically examined based on the three research questions presented in the previous section.

3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to examine ESP teachers' FA practices via blended learning at Chinese vocational polytechnics. In doing so, the perceptions of ESP teachers as key practitioners and administrators of the ESP course is essential to examine all the key variables of this study. The information on the ESP teachers as key purposive samples are as follows;

Table 1 Participants' Demographic Information

Details	Remarks
Participants	1 male teacher, 9 female teachers All aged between 40-46 years
Degree	8 have master degree in English linguistics or English literature, 2 have bachelor degree in English literature and in Business English respectively

Ranking	1 professor, 3 associate professors,6 senior lecturers, ,
Years of ESP teaching experience	5 have 10-15 years, 5 less than 10 years
Years of blended learning experience	8 have more than 7 years, 2 less than 7 years

Participants' Profiles

The data in Table 1 above indicate that the majority (80%) of the ESP teachers who participated in this study were master degree holders. Surprisingly, as far as the participants' specialist fields are concerned, the findings revealed that most of these teachers (90%) held a degree in Applied Linguistics or English Literature and only 1 participant's subject field was in Business English. As far as the years of ESP teaching is concerned, interestingly, all participants had over 5 years teaching experience and half of them even had a long teaching experience of 10-15 years. With regard to blended teaching experience, most of them started to experiment this mode 7 years ago when the new concept of online teaching and blended learning was just introduced to China. It is noticeable that 40% of participants had the ranking of associate professor or even professor, and 60% were senior lecturers with rich teaching experience

Table 2 Sample Responses & Emerging Themes

Participants	Sample responses	Themes
T1	When we design assessment plan, the balance of different components of overall assessment and the level of difficulty will have to be taken into consideration.	ESP Teachers' Difficulty in Following ESP Assessment Principles
T3 T4	No, I haven't received any training on ESP or on formative assessment or blended learning.	Limited Training and Absence of Specific Guideline
T2	The construction of online platform with high quality teaching resources is too demanding for our English teachers.	Blended Assessment is Demanding for ESP Teachers
T5	Because there are too many students in a language class, we can't often do OP. Maybe each student can just do it once or twice in a semester.	Large Class Size
T6	So this is actually a problem that I have been thinking about how to solve. It's really different, so how to inspire students to want this thing is a particularly difficult point for me.	Students' Lack of Motivation

ESP Teachers' Difficulty in Following ESP Assessment Principles

The overall perception of ESP teachers on FA within blended learning is that it is more difficult to implement than summative assessment as FA demands a good overall design from identifying assessment objectives to assessment implementation and feedback. As one teacher put it as follows,

> *When we design assessment plan, the balance of different components of overall assessment and the level of difficulty will have to be taken into consideration. Facing those students with low level of motivation in participation, we teachers really feel great pressure and face such difficulty. So now for me, comparing with FA, it is much easier to conduct summative assessment.* (T1)

The teachers were asked about their perceptions of difficulties or problems in conducting FA in ESP courses. It is noticeable that all participants (100%) reported their lack of confidence in implementing FA in ESP courses relating to validity, reliability and washback on teaching and learning. All participants reported their identification of assessment objective with their students in their first class. However, none of these teachers made it clear how they carried out the crucial step of needs analysis and how they identified their learners' pedagogical needs.

As for FA activities conducted, all participants (100%) reported they had designed and administered both online quizzes, online discussions and offline assessment activities and assignments. Surprisingly, no one mentioned their consideration of arranging contextualized assessment activities and how they integrated both language knowledge and content knowledge in these tests. As far as grading standard is concerned, the findings indicate that 70% (7 in 10) reported that they only had general grading standard for tests or assignments, such as oral presentation and writing assignments. Just as one teacher (T2) stated her assessment standard for oral presentation as follows:

> *For OP, we will basically look at several aspects. The first one is your content, is it relevant? or is it off-point? The relevance of the content is very important. The second is whether your argument is logical. For example, you talk about company cultures. From what angle do you present it? One more thing, after all we talk about it in English, your fluency will be assessed but it won't take up a big portion as this is not a language course. We don't expect you to be standard, but try to be fluent and have accurate pronunciation, right? (T2)*

In the same vein, according to another teacher,

> *For BECP oral presentation, basically I just follow the grading of BECP speaking test. There are four parts including Grammar and Vocabulary, Discourse, Pronunciation and interactive communication. If the total score is 100 points, then each component can take up 25 points. I feel that this way of assessing students' speaking is very scientific and objective, convincing for students and helps to guarantee the reliability and validity as BEC test is very influential in the world (laughing).* (T3)

Limited Training and Absence of Specific Guidelines

When teachers were asked if they had attended or received any training or guidelines for ESP assessment and if they had attended or received any training or guidelines for online and blended assessment, their responses were surprising. The findings show that more half of them (6 in 10) mentioned that they had been through two school-wide evaluation projects on teachers consecutively over the past 10 years: one is vocational teaching ability

evaluation and the other is valid classroom teaching evaluation. They received the grading scale with indicators to evaluate their teaching performance, among which there was the assessment approach teachers adopted on students' performance. They did not receive any specific guidelines for ESP FA via blended learning. Two teachers (20%) also mentioned these evaluation projects but they disagreed that these projects could be counted as specific training on ESP FA as these trainings were provided for all teachers from different disciplines.

As for training for online assessment and blended learning assessment, most teachers said related trainings had been organized on campus several times but they did not receive any training specific for ESP teachers and for blended assessment within ESP courses. It is interesting to note that only two teachers stated that they went outside school for online assessment training but the training topics were not centered on ESP courses. They were not satisfied with these trainings or workshops as they only learnt some technical skills on how to assess students online. Only one teacher pointed out two meaningful training experiences called *Dynamic English* and *Australian Project training,* from which she got specific guidance on FA for ESP. According to her,

> *"For teaching training by Dynamic English, the greatest inspiration is to keep record of learning achievements. For training by Australian project, studying is always very stressful. There are tasks every week, tasks every month, and then you come to the end of a semester. It should be said that more (understandings and benefits) comes from these trainings. I think it is quite useful".* (T2)

Blended Assessment is Demanding for ESP Teachers

When teachers were asked how they implemented ESP FA by integrating online and offline assessment activities to assess students' skill acquisition, all teachers (100%) showed a positive attitude towards the use of online platform to implement FA, especially considering the easy-to-use functions and the great convenience provided by online platforms, where teachers could make online quizzes and online discussions as these platforms could give spontaneous grading results and timely feedback for students to check and correct. However, most participants stated the great challenges in constructing online courses including completing the whole set of course video resources, uploading them online, designing online quizzes and giving students feedback before class, during class and after class. As one of the participants stated,

> *The construction of online platform with high quality teaching resources is too demanding for our English teachers. It is ok if the platform is easy to learn and use, but taking the first step of making course teaching videos as an example, it requires technical skills to use video-making software. If we want to make high-definition videos, we have no choice but to the companies specializing in making videos, but they charge quite a lot, ... (a long sigh). The construction process includes a large amount of work, which calls for a team with good cooperation while in fact, only one or two teachers do all.* (T4)

When teachers were asked about the blended mode that they applied to assess students' language skills in listening, speaking, reading and writing within specific contexts, most of them （70%）reported that they adopted task-based learning mode and provided opportunities for students to practice skills. They mainly used online quizzes to test students' vocabulary and key knowledge points and online discussion for certain topics to monitor students' progress. Only 2 teachers clearly stated that they had been experimenting with flipped classroom mode

by assigning tasks before class, practising core skills in class and giving after-class homework to facilitate acquired skills. Teacher 2 shared her feelings after experimenting with flipped class mode for over 5 years:

> *I think flipped class is something that requires a huge investment in the early stage, but I think it will have endless benefits in the later stage. It was very difficult for me at first, because I had to set up resources and so on, but after finishing it, I felt very good about this course. The understanding is actually clearer, which means you will be very clear about the logical relationship between the 8 units in my class this semester, what knowledge points and language points are contained in them, and what goals I want students to achieve. In fact, you will have a clearer understanding.* (T2)

Large Class Size

When teachers were asked about the difficulties or challenges in their FA practices, most of them stated that big language classes with over 40 students had obviously affected the quality of assessment activities, especially those individual projects such as oral presentation and teachers' assessment feedback to individuals. The challenge of big language class was clearly reflected in teachers' interview:

> *Because there are too many students in a language class, we can't often do OP. Maybe each student can just do it once or twice in a semester. That is actually enough. Student will take turns and each student will have 1 or 2 times in a semester. I am also thinking, I wonder if we can turn the individual presentation into team report. This will also make timely feedback possible for me.* (T4)

Another pointed out the negative effect of large class size on speaking assessment practices:

> *But it's still the same old problem. There are a lot of students, so you know the spoken language, right? The effect is not that good, so this is what I mainly use now, which is to let them do OP one by one, for example, let me give an example. I think the topic, for example, we have finished a topic.* (T5)

Students' Lack of Motivation

When teachers were asked about the frequency of assessment activities conducted in a semester and the way to give students' feedback after grading, most of them (80%) reported at least 1-2 times for each class to monitor students' progress. They further mentioned students' motivation and participation in assessment activities and believed that students' motivation including intrinsic motivation and extrinsic motivation plays a crucial role in deciding whether FA via blended learning could be conducted successfully or not. 2 teachers pointed out directly that motivating students to actively participate was rather difficult for them as they justified those students' passive performance with a low goal of only passing course assessment, rather than acquire professional knowledge and skill from the course. This view is clearly reflected in their interview:

> *I suddenly realized that this FA is really a big driving force, very big, externally driven. For internal motivation, sometimes we really find it very difficult, and there's no way around it.* (T5)

> *So this is actually a problem that I have been thinking about how to solve. It's really different, so how to inspire students to want this thing is a particularly difficult point for me. I urgently need someone to inspire his participation. Many of them say that 60 points is enough.* (T6)

Discussion

The findings indicated that based on from the teachers' educational and professional background, it is reasonable to argue that the ability to fully implement ESP FA successfully might be inadequate due to the list of challenges they had to encounter and as ESP assessment developers they need more literacy to analyze target communicative

tasks and language and develop test tasks that reflect target tasks (Douglas, 2013). This is due to the fact that literacy on 'Needs Analysis' is critical to ESP and is a fundamental component in ESP course design (Adam, 2020). However, this was not highlighted when teachers talked about how they set course and lesson objectives in the interview as the specific aim of ESP teaching is to prepare learners to communicate effectively in the tasks they will need to perform in their chosen future professions (Savas, 2009). Moreover, the document analysis of the teachers' teaching design were found not to fully based on specific workplace tasks. Task-based learning (TBL), content and language integrated learning (CLIL), the communicative approach (CA) and cooperative learning (CL) are among the suitable approaches to ESP teaching and learning (Dudley-Evans & St. John, 1998; Richards, 2001), but these were not fully reflected in both the teachers' practices and teaching documents.

It has been justified by related literature (e.g. Li & Shi, 2018; Ning, 2019) that the majority of current ESP teachers in China have been transformed from EGP teachers who have been teaching general purpose English for many years and these teachers are expected to meet big challenges and difficulties during the transformation. Having lack of formal ESP education, interdisciplinary knowledge and workplace experience, it will become quite hard for these ESP teachers to develop tasks based on their students' subject field knowledge for assessment activities. ESP has its distinctive nature from EGP in that ESP teaching requires certain skills and knowledge of particular disciplines, occupations and activities related to grammar, terminology, register, discourse and genre (Dudley-Evans & St. John, 1998). Therefore, it is a must to integrate the content of the students' specialist subjects in language class assessment tasks. It is also an ongoing process of monitoring students' learning in order to further promote teaching and learning. Moreover, formative assessment has an iterative nature and dynamic cycle involving a complex process.

As far as ESP assessment is concerned, besides adhering to assessment principles for language, ESP assessment also follows the principles of authenticity of tasks and interaction between language knowledge and content knowledge (Douglas, 2000). All of these require ESP teachers to integrate into their assessment practice to make it beneficial for students' further learning. The difficulty and challenge in following ESP assessment principles have been clearly reflected in interview:

"*When we design assessment plan, the balance of different components of overall assessment and the level of difficulty will have to be taken into consideration. Facing those students with low level of motivation in participation, we teachers really feel great pressure and face such difficulty. So now for me, comparing with FA, it is much easier to conduct summative assessment*" (T1).

With regard to training for ESP FA and for blended learning application, it is reasonable to argue that there have been no training directly related to and beneficial for ESP teachers' FA practices. Half of the participants in this study mentioned school-wide evaluation projects on teaching ability and assessment was included as part of evaluation indicators. Even if this is the case, no specific guidelines or on-site supervisory guidance have been found to provide for these teachers. Without understanding of assessment purposes, its processes and lack of mastery in application, teachers used tests to obtain grades, instead of aiming to improve teaching and learning (Giraldo, 2018). Guiding policies are usually general in nature and not specific enough for a detailed running of a course or curriculum, and as a result, there is a lack of specific implementation model of FA. Narathakoon, Sapsirin, and Subphadoongchone (2020, p. 139) pointed out that teachers "alter their beliefs and principles during actual teaching practices" even though experienced teachers have clear beliefs and are equipped with knowledge

and principles. Consequently, the discrepancies inevitably emerge between the desired goals and outcomes of FA promoted by official documents and what is happening in reality.

FA is process-based and embodies a five-phase cycle (Gulikers & Baartman's, 2017) from clarifying learning goals until adjusting teaching and learning. ESP FA itself is quite complex and the involvement of both online and face-to-face assessment for blended mode inevitably result in assessment tension for language teachers (Chan, 2021) and unavoidable conflict between teachers' increasing workload and professional development mandates and FA call for teachers' timely, instant support and feedbacks to monitor students' development (Can, 2019). The findings showed that teachers need to construct the whole set of online course resources first before conducting blended assessment, such as making good quality teaching videos, online exercises, quizzes and online discussion. With limited knowledge and experience, and there were usually only two teachers who were responsible for the teaching and assessment of one ESP course with four language classes, ESP FA practices had become so demanding that participants in this study urgently called for dedicated teamwork to fulfil such big and continuous project.

Concerning class size, the findings showed that over half of participants in this study mentioned the issue of overcrowded classes with over 40 students in each class. Overall, these teachers agreed that large classes had negative effects on their assessment practices as it had not only affected teachers' arrangement of assessment activities, but it also reduced practice opportunities for each individual with fixed teaching hours for an ESP course. Moreover, at grading and offering feedback stage, large class size posed great challenge to teachers, which was reflected in interview as follows:

> "*For written assignments, I really cannot achieve this. Homework grading and feedback is very difficult with such large classes, and I have four classes, even if I use the computer, the workload is still very heavy, taking up a lot of my personal time after class*".

Küçükler and Kodal (2019) pointed out classes bigger than 25 usually did not give students and instructors the chance to engage through conversation and writing. Big classes will lead to insufficient communication between teachers and students, and cause other issues including checking attendance, monitoring assignments, checking comprehension. Considering the aim and purpose of ESP FA to preparing the learners to communicate effectively in the tasks they will need to perform in their chosen professions (Savas, 2009), insufficient interaction between teacher and students and among students and the few or absence of personalized feedback will definitely affect the fulfilment of desired course outcomes. To reduce the negative effect of large class, some teachers' practice of adjusting their assessment activities in this study, including using group presentation rather than individual presentation, using peer assessment provide new insights to solve this issue. This is in line with the strategies of cooperative learning (Shaw, 2018), group learning and active learning to mitigate possible negative effects (Küçükler & Kodal, 2019).

As far as students' participation in FA, the findings indicate that four fifth of the ESP teachers in this study stated that at least half of their students actively participated in completing online and offline assessment tasks all the time whereas there were students with low English level, who performed rather passively and kept quiet sitting at the back of class and seldom joined class discussion actively. According to Maslow (1987), most human behaviors are motivated by multiple needs. Thus, it is reasonable to argue that ESP assessment activities could not fully motivate these passive students to participate by not addressing their learning needs. There may also be other reasons to this, for example, low level of English communication ability, lack of confidence to speak up in

public, assessment activities not interesting enough or online platform not easy to use. However, ESP learners were motivated to learn specific language to meet the target needs and teachers were reminded to improve and sustain the students' intrinsic motivation (Kereković, 2021).

Considering current challenges and issues that ESP teachers meet in their FA practices, explicit guidelines (See Figure 2) are proposed in this study as reference for policymakers and related departments to develop best practices in ESP FA. Following Gulikers and Baartman (2017) five-phase FA cycle (See Figure 1), it integrates periodical training specific for ESP assessment within blended learning mode and periodical check on teachers' FA practices by teaching supervisors and head of unit while providing timely and supervisory feedback and guidance. Meanwhile, maintaining policy of teachers' internship practice, typical work cases will have to be formulated through collaboration and periodic discussion between teachers and trading company employees.
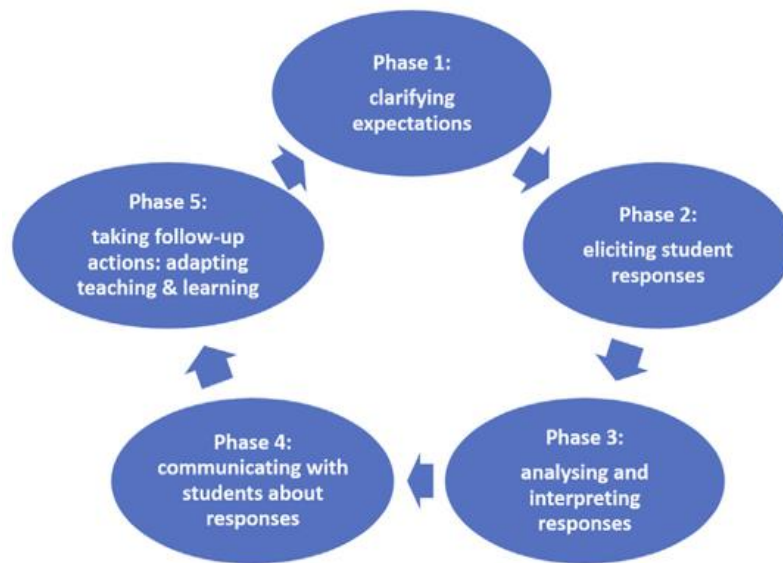
Figure 1 Five Phase FA Cycle (Gulikers and Baartman (2017)
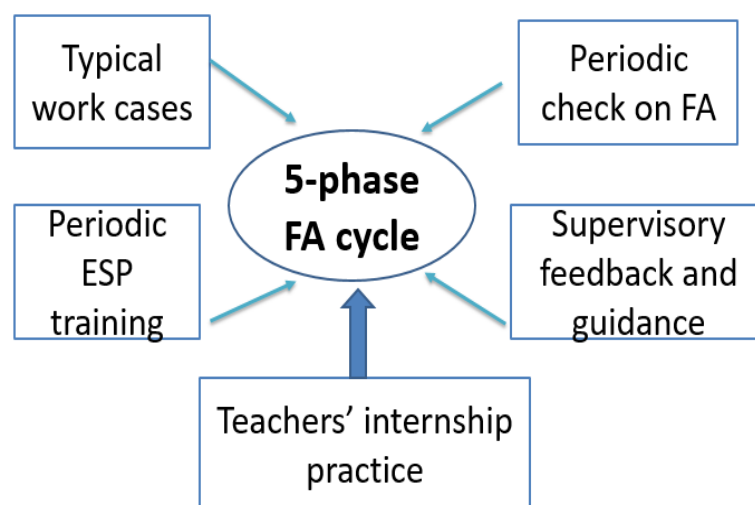
Figure 2 Extended FA Model

4. CONCLUSION

This findings from this study are significant in providing insights into ESP teachers' FA practices via blended learning at Chinese vocational polytechnics. Facing the new round of educational reform vigorously shifting towards full-scale digital learning mode integrated into Chinese vocational education, English teachers as ESP practitioners teaching Business English majors are faced with challenges originating from unresolved issues from different perspectives including educational, management policy and students. The teachers' ESP FA practices via blended learning have demonstrated their positive attitude, great efforts and attempts to address the challenges concerning ESP assessment and its desired outcomes. In the process, they are guided by their own perceptions and understanding of ESP and its FA through both online and face-to-face assessment activities which present varying degrees of conformity and divergence in comparison with good practices of ESP and language assessment. ESP teachers' educational and professional background, specific training, presence of operational guidelines for ESP FA via blended learning mode, quality of online course resources, language class size and level of students' motivation in active participation are all aspects that influence their practices. This study also points out justifications for developing explicit guidelines for best practices in ESP FA to follow ESP assessment principles and achieve expected outcomes to further promote ESP teaching and learning and gain better assessment results. Such measure is crucial and beneficial to facilitate teachers' professional development and the effectiveness of implementing ESP FA practices to reach the ultimate goal of developing ESP learners' communicative competence within their chosen professional contexts.

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