# Developments in English for Specific Purposes Research

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This paper reviews trends and developments in English for specific purposes (ESP) research. Topics covered include genre, corpus studies, English as a lingua franca, advanced academic literacies, identity, and ethnographic approaches to researching specific purposes language use. Issues in developing courses that meet learners' needs are discussed. A proposal is made for how this might be further investigated, drawing on the notions of imagined and possible selves. Other suggestions are also made for future directions in ESP research.

A number of previous publications have looked at current and future directions in English for specific purposes (ESP) research. This includes journal articles such as Paltridge and Starfield's (2014) review in the *Revue Française de Linguistique Appliqué* and book chapters in Belcher's (2009) *English for Specific Purposes in Theory and Practice,* Belcher et al.'s (2011) *New Directions in English for Specific Purposes Research* and Paltridge and Starfield's (2013) *Handbook of English for Specific Purposes.* Reviews on this topic have also been published by Hewings (2002), Master (2005), and Paltridge and Starfield (2011). Trends that have been identified in these publications include a focus on genre, the use of corpora to carry out studies of ESP language use and the use and place of English as a lingua franca in ESP settings. Further trends are the examination of advanced academic literacies, ESP and identity, and ethnographic approaches to researching specific purposes language use. Other topics that have been discussed include disciplinary language and ESP, needs analysis and ESP, and critical discourse analysis and ESP (see Belcher, Johns, & Paltridge, 2011, for chapters on these topics).

## Genre and ESP

A key notion in ESP is genre which has a long history in the area, especially in the field of academic writing. Paltridge (2013) discusses the development of genre in the field of ESP, discussing its early origins, its relation with discourse analysis, and what came to be known as the Create a research space (CARS) model in ESP genre studies. He also discusses the relation between genre and language, multimodality, genre as social action (Miller, 1984) in ESP research, the teaching and learning of specific purpose genres and future directions for ESP genre studies. Paltridge (2014) traces the history of genre and genre-based teaching in the area of second language academic writing through key work that has been influential in its development from Swales' (1981) paper on research article introductions, Miller's (1984) "Genre as social action" and the work of the Sydney School of genre studies starting with Martin's (1984) "Genre, register, and language" through to the present day where both the Sydney School and Rhetorical Genre Studies (Artemeva & Freedman, 2008) are now having an influence on ESP research into genre.

## Ethnographic Perspectives on ESP

Ethnographic research is becoming more common in ESP research, both on its own and in combination with other research approaches in order to gain a better and more contextualised understanding of ESP language use. Handford and Matous (2011), for example, describe a study of on-site interactions in the international construction industry where they used corpus techniques to analyse audio and video data and combined this with interviews, field notes and expert informant insights to examine the language used by Japanese and Cantonese speaking workers on a construction site in Hong Kong. They did this by shadowing two Japanese engineers and recording their interactions, then interviewing them and a number of other people on the construction site.

Chun's (2015) classroom ethnography of an English for Academic Purposes (EAP) program in Canada is a further example of how ethnography can help us understand what is going on in ESP classrooms and how we might wish to change them. Chun observed the EAP class over a period of nine months, as well

as examined the textbook and other curriculum materials used by the teacher. He also took fieldnotes of his classroom observations and the meetings he had with the instructor. He carried out semi-structured interviews with the teacher and her students, collected students' written assignments and photos the students had taken of their literacy practices outside of the classroom, as well as took his own photos of the classroom interiors. Chun considered the findings of his study in relation to theoretical discussions of critical literacy and how these are taken up in actual practice, including what counts as "critical" (and "uncritical") in EAP classrooms and why this matters. He then proposes what an alternative EAP curriculum might look like based on the findings of his study.

More broadly, Paltridge and Starfield (2016) provide an overview of EAP research that has taken an ethnographic perspective. They discuss the basic characteristics of ethnographically-oriented research and research techniques that are typically drawn on in these kinds of studies. They then review examples of ethnographically-oriented research that focuses on writing, speaking, reading and listening, and the teaching and learning of EAP. The chapter concludes by making suggestions for future ethnographically-oriented research in the area of EAP (see also Dressen Hammouda, 2013, for a discussion of ethnography in ESP research).

Paltridge, Starfield, and Tardy's (2016) book examines ethnographic research into academic writing, more specifically. Their book focuses on a range of contexts including undergraduate education, postgraduate education, and scholarly publication as well as the teaching and learning of academic writing. The book contains chapters on context and academic writing and an overview of methodological issues to consider in carrying out ethnographically-oriented academic writing research. This ethnographically-oriented work parallels what Berkenkotter (2009) calls a context-based, rhetorically-oriented, "wide-angle" approach to genre analysis that moves beyond solely text-based analysis to explore factors that influence the creation and reception of genres in particular social, cultural and political settings. Indeed, as Devitt (2009) argues, the forms of genres are only meaningful within their social, cultural (and individual) contexts. That is, forms in genres "take their meaning from who uses them, in

what ways, with what motives and expectations" (p. 35). This view of writing further aims to understand texts not just from an outsider perspective but, equally and importantly, from insiders' perspectives as well (Donahue and Lillis, 2014) in terms of "what writers do, why and in which contexts" (Lillis, 2013, p. 159).

## ESP and English as a Lingua Franca

English is now well established as the lingua franca of worldwide communication. It is the language of international business, international conferences, international education, the international communications network, international popular music and international travellers. A Thai, for example, asking directions in Malaysia will probably make his or her first attempts at communication in English. Likewise, a Japanese company doing business with any part of Europe is most likely to conduct its dealings in English. It is the native language of neither group of speakers, but it is the language they will most likely use to bridge the gap. Nickerson (2013) discusses ESP and English as a lingua franca, while Mauranen (2011) discusses English as the lingua franca of the academic world. In her book *English as a Lingua Franca in the International University*, Jenkins (2014) discusses English as a lingua franca in academic settings and, in particular, the politics of academic English language policies. An important area of the lingua franca use of English is in the area of business English, where there has been a wide range of research conducted on this topic. The 2005 special issue of *English for Specific Purposes* provides examples of this research. Other examples of research in this area are in Nickerson's (2013) chapter on this topic.

## ESP and Advanced Academic Literacies

In the area of advanced academic literacies, Paltridge, Starfield and Ravelli (Paltridge et al., 2012a, 2012b; Ravelli, Paltridge, & Starfield, 2014; Starfield et al., 2012, 2104) have examined doctoral writing in the visual and performing arts. The aim of their study was to gain an understanding, not only of the kinds of texts these students needed to write, but why they write them as they do, so

that they could better advise students of the choices available to them in their area of study, as well as the constraints they still need to take account of in their writing. The data they drew on for their study included a nation-wide survey of universities (in Australia) which offered these degrees, the collection of doctoral texts, supervisor questionnaires, as well as interviews with students and supervisors. In addition, they examined university prospectuses, information given to students in relation to their candidature, the published research into visual arts PhD examination, in-house art school publications and discussion papers on the topic of our study. They also attended roundtable discussions on doctoral research in the visual and performing arts as well as attended students' exhibition openings.

Lillis and Curry (2010) and Li (2006a, 2006b, 2007) are further examples of advanced academic literacies research, in their case, the examination of the experiences of multilingual scholars seeking to publish their work in English (see Flowerdew, 2013, for an overview of research in this area). In their book *Academic Writing in a Global Context*, Lillis and Curry (2010) employed text analysis, interviews, observations, document analysis, analysis of written correspondence, and reviewers' and editors' comments to examine these experiences. Their later book (Curry and Lillis, 2013) drew on this research to propose strategies that multilingual writers can adopt to enhance their chances of getting published as well as how other people can support these writers in this endeavor. Li (2006b) examined a computer science student's research writing in Chinese and English, while Li (2006a) examined issues faced by a physics student wanting to publish in English. In her (2007) paper Li examined a chemistry student's process logs, drafts of his writing, email exchanges she had with the student, and interview data to examine how he went about writing for publication and the engagement he had with others as he did this.

## Identity, Learner Needs and ESP

Identity (Norton & Toohey, 2011) and imagined communities (Anderson, 1991; Kanno & Norton, 2003) are also important research developments in ESP research. Belcher and Lukkarila (2011) argue that teachers need to learn more

about their learners' imagined communities and "who they want to become"—that is, their imagined identities—if they really want to help them achieve their long-term, rather than just their short-term, language learning goals. That is, we need to put our learners, as they say, "front and center" in our needs analyses so that we can help them become who they want to become through language. Without this, they ask, "How can our teaching every really be called learner-centered?" and "Can we claim to be responsive to learners' own purposes for language learning if we are not aware of their sense of their own needs and goals?" (p. 89). A focus on identity in ESP teaching and learning, thus, has an important role to play in bringing about social change which is, for many, a goal of language learning.

Gathering data on each learner's goals and imagined identities, as they point out, may not always be practical, but there are things that teachers can do to tap into learners' perceptions of their (evolving) identities that may not require a lot of time and effort. These may include language and literacy autobiographies, reflective journals about language use, reports on interviews with classmates about their learning goals, and collaborative survey projects. This learner identity data collection, they argue, "encourages us to rethink not only what we offer learners in terms of content ... but also how we offer that content – the degree to which we support learners' construction of a vision they have of themselves" (Belcher & Lukkarila, 2011, p. 90). It is not, of course, the case that the courses we teach can address the future needs of all our students, but the feedback we give students on their work and the discussions we have with them in class can be better focussed if we know where each of our students are wanting to go, what they want to do, and who they want to become through English.

One way in which this matter can also be explored is through the idea of imagined and possible selves (Ryan & Irie, 2014; Henry, 2015); that is, who it is that our learners want to become or imagine they can be through English. Dörnyei (2009) suggests we do this by examining learners' views of their ideal L2 self, their ought-to L2 self, and how their L2 learning experiences relate to this (Dörnyei, 2009, 2010). He outlines these as:

- The *Ideal L2 Self*; that is, who students would like "to be" in their second

    language

- The *Ought-to L2 Self*; the attributes students believe they ought to possess in order to meet expectations and to avoid possible negative outcomes

- The *L2 Learning Experience*; how students' language learning experiences relate to their ideal L2 self and their ought-to L2 self; that is, the impact of the teacher, the curriculum, the peer group, and the students' experience of success in relation to their possible selves.

What we find from these investigations can then be drawn on to help learners build a vision (Dörnyei & Kubanyiova, 2014) for who they want to be through English and how they might go about achieving this.

While studies of this kind have been carried out in the area of English language teaching in general (e.g., Dörnyei et al., 2006; Ryan, 2009; Taguchi et al., 2009), there has been less attention to this in the area of ESP. This research can give us an inside view of the worlds in which our learners are both participating and in which they wish to participate. It can also show us ways in which we can help learners become central rather than peripheral members of their desired academic, professional or other communities in a way that can make their imagined communities more of a reality for them.

## Conclusion

An interesting trend that can be seen from the work that has been referred to in this paper is that much of it is qualitative in orientation (see Tardy, 2013, for a review on research methods often used by ESP researchers). Gollin-Kies (2014) points to this trend in ESP research in her review of articles published between 2003 and 2012 in the journals *English for Specific Purposes* and the *Journal of English for Specific Purposes*. The most common type of study she found was the analysis of written discourse and a predominance of ethnographic methods. She also saw an increase in the use of corpus techniques to analyse written discourse. There were very few experimental studies, she found, and barely any large-scale empirical studies in the years of publication she examined. This is perhaps like some other but not all (see Benson, et al., 2009) journals in the field of English language teaching such as *TESOL Quarterly* (Gollin-Kies, 2014; Paltridge &

Mahboob, 2014) where a similar trend can be seen.

Gollin-Kies (2014) suggests editors of ESP journals actively encourage more quantitative articles to counter this current imbalance. It could be, however, that this lack of quantitative research is not, as Gollin-Kies points out, the result of a "strategy of exclusion" (p. 33), but rather that this is what ESP researchers are mostly doing and the view of research (and reality) with which they are predominantly working. In my view the call should be to authors to take on more large-scale empirical work which will bring a quantitative dimension back into focus and provide a balance to the qualitative orientation which we currently see in ESP research. Gollin-Kies also proposes more mixed methods studies that draw on the strengths of both quantitative and qualitative orientations to research as well as more collaborative, larger scale mixed method research across institutions as a counter to focusing on just a single research perspective and the limitations that working with each of these, on their own, entails. All of this can only benefit future ESP research, in my view.

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