# Current and Future Directions in English for Specific Purposes Research

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# CURRENT AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS IN ENGLISH FOR SPECIFIC PURPOSES RESEARCH

Sue Starfield

# Current and Future Directions in English for Specific Purposes Research

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In this introduction to the *Revue française de linguistique appliquée* we provide an overview of current and future directions in English for specific purposes (ESP) research. We do this by discussing themes that have emerged in a number of publications we have been involved in over the past few years which have dealt with this topic.

First, in a chapter we wrote for the *Routledge Handbook of Research in Second Language Teaching and Learning* (Paltridge & Starfield 2011) we reviewed developments in the field, mostly as seen through the pages of the journal *English for Specific Purposes* an international peer-reviewed journal which we were co-editing at that time. As we pointed out in that chapter, research into the language and discourse of specific purpose genres has been important in the field since the early days of the journal. The article by Elaine Tarone and her colleagues (Tarone et al. 1981) that appeared in the first volume of the journal is an example of just this. In this article, Tarone and her colleagues use the word *genre* for the first time in ESP published research, at the very same time that John Swales (1981) published his seminal research into the discourse structure of research article introductions in the *Aston ESP Research Reports*. As we all know, genre has become a significant notion in the area of ESP research, both with the publication of Swales's (1990) book *Genre Analysis* and the very many genre-oriented publications that have followed on from this (see Paltridge 2013, 2014 for reviews of this work). ESP genre studies, in more recent years however have aimed to go beyond descriptions of texts, to exploring *the social action of genres*, their socially situated nature and the role the genre is playing in the particular setting. Genre studies have also increasingly looked at the multimodal nature of texts, especially with the increase in digital genres which students and practitioners need to be able to engage in, in contemporary academic and workplace settings (see Prior 2013).

A further development in ESP research that we discuss in that chapter is the use of computers to assist in research into specific purpose language use. These *corpus-based studies* have helped us to better understand the nature of specific purpose language use by virtue of the sheer sweep and scale with which this kind of research can now be carried out. A number of corpora that have been developed in recent years have greatly facilitated this research. A number of these are open access. These include the Michigan Corpus of Academic Spoken English (http://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/micase/), the British Academic Spoken English corpus (www2.warwick.ac.uk/fac/soc/al/research/collect/base/) and the British Academic Written English corpus (www2.warwick.ac.uk/fac/soc/al/research/collect/ bawe). The Michigan corpus contains data from a wide range of spoken academic genres as well as information on speaker attributes and characteristics of the speech events that are contained in the data. The *British Academic Spoken English* corpus includes recordings of conference presentations, lectures and seminars, interviews with academic staff, as well as tagged transcripts of some of the data. The *British Academic Written English* corpus includes

contextual information on the data such as the gender and year of study of the student who wrote the text, details of the course the assignment was set for, and the grade that was awarded to the text. This kind of information is extremely useful to ESP researchers as it enables them to go beyond word counts and frequencies to providing a more contextualised understanding of the findings of their research (see Nesi (2013) for a review of corpus-based studies in the area of English for specific purposes).

The research that is currently being published in *English for Specific Purposes* is especially international in character. In 2013, for example, authors who published in the journal were from Austria, Australia, Hong Kong, Mainland China, Japan, Korea, Rwanda, Singapore, South Africa, Spain, Sweden, Taiwan, the US and the UK. The first issue of the journal for 2014, further, was a special issue on ESP research carried out in Asia, with authors from Mainland China, Hong Kong, Iran and Taiwan. That issue also contained articles by authors from Vietnam, New Zealand and Australia. The regions which downloaded articles from *English for Specific Purposes* in 2012 (the most recent year available) were, in descending order: Asia, Europe, North America, Australasia, the Middle East, Africa and South America. So, when in 1991, Ann Johns and Tony Dudley-Evans said that English for specific purposes is both international in scope as well as being specific in purpose, they were as much talking about its future as they were about the status of ESP at that particular time. This is especially the case with the increase in the use of *English as the lingua franca of international research*. Often, in these settings English is the native language of neither group of users but it is the language they will most likely use to communicate with each other. This is most certainly the case with the journal *English for Specific Purposes* where the majority of its current authors and a very large number of its readers are no longer from the English-speaking 'centre' (see Jenkins 2014, Mauranen 2012, Nickerson 2013, Seidlhofer 2011 for reviews of research in the area of English as the *lingua franca*).

There has also been, in recent years, an increased *attention given in ESP research to advanced academic literacies* and students' multiple literacy needs in their present and future lives. This has included research into writing for publication and thesis and dissertation writing in a second language. These two areas have become especially important with the ever increasing globalisation of higher education, the continued dominance of English as the language of scientific communication and the growing pressure on academics for whom English is not their native language to publish in English language journals. This research draws our attention to the challenges that many 'off-network' writers face in doing this. These challenges, further, are not only linguistic as second language writers attempt to balance the desire to gain international recognition through publication in English with choices that reflect their own value systems and ideologies that may reflect their desire to resist the global dominance of English (see Flowerdew 2013 for a review of research in the area of writing for publication; Thompson 2013 for research into thesis and dissertation writing; Starfield 2013 for critical perspectives on writing for academic publication).

*Identity* has also become an important topic in ESP research. Kanno and Norton (2003) and Norton and Toohey (2011) discuss identity in relation to learners' imagined communities, arguing that their desired memberships of these communities influence their motivation for learning and the investment they make in the learning. Indeed as Norton and Toohey (2011) argue, these imagined communities may have "a stronger impact on their investment in language learning" (p. 422) than the contexts in which they are currently engaged. 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. 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.

There has also seen an increase in the use of *ethnographic* techniques as a way of trying to understand the complexities of ESP language use and the worlds in which our students need to use this language. Chun's (2010) doctoral dissertation where he carried out a classroom ethnography of an English for academic purposes (EAP) program that had the goal of preparing students for university studies in English is an example of this. Chun observed an EAP class over a period of nine months, as well as examined the textbook used by the teacher, collected photocopies of curriculum materials, took fieldnotes of his classroom observations and meetings with the instructor, carried out semi-structured interviews with the instructor and her students, collected students' written assignments and photos they had taken of their literacy practices outside of the classroom, as well as took photos of the classroom interiors. Lillis and Curry (2010), for their study into multilingual writers' experiences of getting published in English draw on text analysis, interviews, observations, document analysis, written correspondence, and reviewers' and editors' comments to examine their particular question. In a study we carried out with our colleague Louise Ravelli that looked at the texts that doctoral students write in the visual and performing arts we carried out a nation-wide survey to see which universities (in Australia) offered these degrees. We then collected doctoral texts, asked supervisors to compete a questionnaire, as well as interviewed students and their supervisors. In addition, we 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. We also attended roundtable discussions on doctoral research in the visual and performing arts as well as attended students' exhibition openings. The aim of our 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 we 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 (see Paltridge et al. 2012a, 2012b; Starfield et al. 2011, 2104 for publications from this project). Ethnography, then, can play an important role in ESP research in that it can complement the body of textually-oriented research that has already been carried out in the area by providing a contextual orientation to this research that goes beyond description and explanation to an understanding of the worlds of specific purpose language use and what matters for language users in these worlds (see Dressen Hammouda 2013, Starfield 2011 for discussions of ethnographic research in the area of ESP; Starfield 2010 for a discussion of ethnography more generally).

The 2011 volume *Future directions in English for specific purposes research* (Belcher & al. 2011) contains chapters on many of the themes we have discussed so far, as well as chapters on disciplinary language and ESP, context and ESP, ESP classroom-based research, needs analysis and ESP and critical discourse analysis and ESP. Belcher's (2013) chapter 'The future of ESP research' in the *Handbook of English for Specific Purposes* we edited for Wiley-Blackwell (Paltridge & Starfield 2013) carries this discussion further.

As Belcher (2013) argues, despite all of the text-linguistic research that has been carried out in the area of ESP, there are still many written, spoken and digital genres that need to be examined. There is also a need for more research into the needs of undergraduate students and the issues they face in their study. At the other end of the academic scale, by contrast, we are seeing an increased focus on what Hyland (2009) refers to as English for professional academic purposes (EPAP). We are also starting to see work in the area of English for community membership purposes which focuses on the needs of language learners outside their academic or employment contexts, focussing on their everyday communication needs, especially in the area of adult migrant education (see De Silva Joyce & Hood 2009 for an example of this).

Another area Belcher (2013) points to that is in need of further research is the nature of ESP expertise in the sense of how people become ESP teachers and how they develop their expertise as teachers in the area. Relatedly, there is also the matter of moving beyond a native speaker model when establishing goals for learners and to what extent they need to be 'native like' rather than expert users of the language which intersects with the English lingua franca issues mentioned above.

Belcher and Lukkkarila (2009 p. 73) argue that we need to learn "more about how learners see themselves" in order to help them achieve their long term, rather than just their short term, goals. That is, we need to put our learners, as they say, 'front and centre' in our needs analyses so that we can help them become who they want to become through language; that is, to become central, rather than peripheral (Lave & Wenger 1991) members of their desired academic, professional or other communities in a way that can make their imagined communities (Anderson 1991) more of a reality for them.

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