

## **English for Specific Purposes (3rd edition)**

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# English for Specific Purposes

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**Keywords**

English for Specific Purposes (ESP); English for Academic Purposes (EAP); ESP genres; needs analysis; ESP research; ethnographic perspectives; critical perspectives on ESP; technology in ESP; research-informed ESP pedagogy

## **English for Specific Purposes**

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### **Key Points**

- ESP is characterized by a commitment to addressing learners' specific learning purposes and an emphasis on specificity pertaining to lexis, syntactic features, genres, and communicative contexts.
- The key concepts that underpin ESP are genre, discourse community, community of practice, and needs analysis.
- ESP research has taken diverse methodological approaches, from text-analytical approaches to ethnographically-oriented work, mixed-methods designs, and critical perspectives.
- A taxonomy of the types of information to ascertain in needs analysis can be used to provide guidelines on how different types of research approaches and methods can be adopted to provide insights on different aspects of learners' needs, making ESP pedagogy more research-informed.
- Potential future directions of ESP research include the impact of technological advances on genres, new approaches to teaching and learning genres, and the role of practitioners in driving research agendas.

### **Abstract**

In this entry, we introduce the English for Specific Purposes (ESP) movement. We begin by defining ESP: what is meant by “specific purposes”; and how this approach to teaching and research is distinguished from general English. Next, we identify, define and illustrate the key concepts that underpin ESP: genre, discourse community, community of practice, and needs analysis. We then provide an overview of how ESP has been researched. This section introduces examples of objects of study as well as methodological approaches adopted, from text-analytical approaches to ethnographically-oriented work, mixed-methods designs, and critical perspectives. We conclude by discussing the relationship between teaching and researching ESP and propose potential future directions of research. These include the impact of technological advances on genres, new approaches to teaching and researching genres, and the role of practitioners in driving the research agenda.

## **Introduction**

English for Specific Purposes (ESP) is often distinguished from General English or Teaching English for No Obvious Reason (TENOR). Unlike TENOR, ESP is characterized by its commitment to addressing learners' specific learning purposes (Belcher, 2009). Major domains include English for Academic Purposes (EAP), English for Business Purposes (EBP), and English for Occupational Purposes (EOP). Within each domain an ESP course can fall on a continuum from fairly general to highly specific; anywhere, for example, from an English for General Academic Purposes (EGAP) course for university students from different disciplines, to an English for Specific Academic Purposes (ESAP) course for a specific discipline (e.g. Law), to a workshop targeting a specific genre or skill area such as thesis writing for Arts and Humanities postgraduates or three-minute thesis (3MT) presentations in Psychology. The range of possibilities within the general-specific continuum makes the notion of specificity foundational in ESP. Specificity pertains, *inter alia*, to the lexis, syntactic features and genres used by various groups, and the contexts in which those groups operate. This emphasis on specificity provides fertile ground for research on commonalities and differences between disciplines, genres, and skill areas, and the teaching challenges these present.

## **Conceptual Underpinnings**

Conceptually, ESP research draws on various fields related to linguistics, applied linguistics, and professional communication. The following concepts are considered foundational: genre, discourse community, community of practice, and needs analysis.

## **Genre**

The specific needs of ESP learners often spring from the written, spoken and/or multimodal genres they encounter in the situations where they need to use English. Following Swales' (1990) seminal definition, genres in ESP are understood as categories of typified rhetorical actions with shared purposes that arise out of a recurring situation involving spoken or written communication. Examples include a lab report, a TED talk, a master's thesis, and a business proposal. This recurrence gives rise to conventionalized patterns of language use, enabling those who use the genre to recognize a given text as an instantiation of that genre. While genres are conventionalized, they are not uniform; instantiations of genres can be prototypical – adhering closely to convention – or more innovative (Bhatia, 2004; Tardy, 2016). Genres are stable-for-now but not static in that they evolve according to the demand by the socio-cultural context of their production (see, for example, Paltridge and Starfield (2023) on the evolution of the doctoral thesis, and Pérez-Llantada (2021) on the impact of Web 2.0 on professional research genres).

A set of communicative events is classed as a genre if those events share a communicative purpose. But texts which ostensibly have the same communicative purpose could be classed as different genre categories (e.g. magazine adverts and CVs share a promotional communicative purpose) (Askehave, 1999). Genres can also have multiple or "occluded" purposes. For example, the purpose of a

university course catalog is ostensibly to inform prospective students of programs available to them, but closer scrutiny may reveal a promotional dimension.

Since genres are staged and structured (Swales, 1990), they can be broken down into stretches of discourse – rhetorical moves and steps that achieve a particular function and support the writer/speaker in achieving their overall communicative purpose. Moves and steps can be identified based on content and/or linguistic features. The most well-known example of move structure is Swales' (1990) "Create-a-Research-Space" (CARS) model, an ecological metaphor describing the stages of research article introductions across multiple disciplines (see also Bhatia (1993) on moves and steps in sales promotion letters).

### **Discourse Community**

ESP is concerned with language as used by specific communities. Different branches of ESP have adopted different concepts of "communities." EAP and English for Research Publication Purposes (ERPP) have tended to adopt Swales' (1990) conceptualization of "discourse community" to describe occupational, disciplinary or recreational groupings. According to Swales (1990), discourse communities are characterized by shared goals; established channels of communication through which members exchange information and feedback; use of specific genres that facilitate these exchanges; a specialized lexis; and a required level of content and discursive expertise relevant to the group's interests and objectives. The term is "troubled" (Swales, 1998, p. 20) but useful in that it attempts to capture the communality of people's shared activities and the language that arises in the pursuance of those specific and shared activities: an academic discipline, an office floor, and even fan groups such as the "Beyhive" or "Swifties" can be understood as discourse communities.

### **Community of Practice**

Some areas of ESP draw on Lave and Wenger's (1991) concept of "community of practice" (CoP). CoPs are "groups of people who share a concern, a set of problems, or a passion about a topic, and who deepen their knowledge and expertise in this area by interacting on an ongoing basis" (Wenger et al., 2002, p. 4). Within these groups, newcomers engage in "legitimate peripheral participation," which allows them to learn while partaking in the practice of an expert to a limited extent and without full responsibility for the outcome (Lave & Wenger, 1991). This form of participation can lead to fuller involvement over time. Language socialization research, in particular that focusing on second language socialization, has applied the concept of CoP to investigate issues of interest to ESP, such as: EAP learners' socialization into their university and the broader academic community (e.g. Kobayashi et al., 2017); novice professionals' socialization into the English as a Lingua Franca workplace, encompassing issues such as how they learn workplace genres and tacit practices of the CoP through learning-by-doing and from more experienced members of the group (e.g. Chan, 2021a); and how novice professionals overcome communication-related challenges in a new and unfamiliar CoP while building their professional identity (e.g. Chan, 2021b). The concept of CoP helps researchers to focus not only on how ESP learners/users learn to use language on a textual level but also how their sense of professional identity is constructed and how it shapes their language socialization in ESP contexts.

## Needs Analysis

Needs analysis is the cornerstone of ESP in that it enables ESP practitioners to determine the “what” and “how” of a course, a module or a set of materials to enable students to learn the English of their target community. Myriad terms have been used for approaches to needs analysis and aspects to consider. For example, Hutchinson and Waters (1987) define “target needs” in terms of necessities (“what the learner has to know in order to function effectively in the target situation”; p. 55), lacks (“the necessities the learner lacks”; p. 56), and wants (the learner’s view of their own needs), in addition to considering “learning needs,” which represent “what the learner needs to do in order to learn” (p. 54). Other widely used terms include “target situation analysis,” identifying “the tasks and activities learners are/will be using English for” (Dudley-Evans & St John, 1998, p. 125); “present situation analysis,” establishing “what learners already know” (p. 124); and “means analysis,” which relates to “information about the environment in which the course will be run” (p. 125). This range of terms and concepts can cause confusion as they comprise not only “factors and perspectives” (Dudley-Evans & St John, 1998, p. 123), but also types of analysis. Chan (2018) amalgamates these concepts and types of analysis to establish five key strands of information that should be ascertained when analyzing needs and developing curricula: information about the discourse; the target situation; the target learner; teaching and learning methods; and the environment (see Table 1). Although some context-specific information (e.g. the present situation of the target learners) needs to be obtained through in-house needs analysis, existing research can provide other types of information.

**Table 1.** A taxonomy of information about needs.

<i>Information about needs</i>	<i>What the information entails</i>	<i>Possible ways of obtaining the information (by researchers and/or practitioners)</i>
Information about the discourse	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Discourse features of texts</li> <li>• Lexicogrammatical features</li> <li>• Pragmatic features</li> <li>• Specialized vocabulary</li> <li>• Communicative purpose/contexts</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Genre analysis</li> <li>• Discourse analysis</li> <li>• Conversation analysis</li> <li>• Corpus analysis</li> <li>• Multimodal analysis</li> </ul>
Information about the target situation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Genres</li> <li>• Discursive practices</li> <li>• Professional practices</li> <li>• Professional culture</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Critical genre analysis</li> <li>• Ethnography</li> <li>• In-house needs analysis (e.g. interviews, questionnaires, observation)</li> </ul>

Information about the target learner	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Present situation</li> <li>• Lacks</li> <li>• Wants</li> <li>• Rights</li> <li>• Future needs</li> <li>• Imagined future self</li> <li>• Professional identity</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ethnography</li> <li>• Pedagogically-oriented research (e.g. research on learners' lacks, strengths and weaknesses)</li> <li>• In-house needs analysis</li> </ul>
Information about teaching and learning methods	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Learning needs</li> <li>• Teaching materials, methods and tasks</li> <li>• Learning strategies</li> <li>• Learning processes</li> <li>• Ways of applying research</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Pedagogically-oriented research (e.g. SLA research, action research, classroom research, practitioner research)</li> <li>• Textbook analysis</li> <li>• Materials evaluation</li> </ul>
Information about the environment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Constraints</li> <li>• Learning opportunities</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ethnography</li> <li>• In-house needs analysis</li> </ul>

## Researching ESP

ESP research is conducted on diverse objects of study and entails various perspectives.

## Researching ESP Genres

The linguistic characteristics of ESP genres can be analyzed using different methods, from qualitative analysis of exemplars using discourse analysis, conversation analysis, and genre analysis, to quantitative analysis of a large number of texts using corpus software tools, to a combination of methods underpinned by different approaches. The emergence of multimodal genres has also given rise to the analysis of spoken genres that investigate different “semiotic resources afforded by digital technologies” (Xia & Hafner, 2021, p. 33), including paralinguistic and kinesic features.

ESP genre analysis constitutes the mapping of the schematic or rhetorical structure of texts as broken down into moves and steps, and the specific linguistic features and grammatical structures that combine to enable the writer/speaker to achieve their communicative purposes. The (iterative) process of genre analysis entails (in no particular order) establishing the communicative purposes of the genre, identifying how the structure and lexicogrammar contribute to achieving the purpose (this can involve corpus tools), and consultation with experts from the discourse community.

A plethora of genre analyses have been published – particularly in EAP and ERPP – drawing on pre-established models such as Swales’ (1990) CARS model (e.g. Samraj, 2002), taxonomies such as Hyland’s (2005) stance and engagement (Luzón, 2023); or new, inductively derived models (Liu &



Liu, 2023). Some genres (and discourse communities) are easily accessible to the analyst (e.g. research articles), while others are occluded (see, for example, Hyon (2008) on retention-promotion-tenure applications; and Loudermilk (2007) on MBA thought essays).

The specific nature of ESP underscores the need for research to illuminate how a particular genre is different from or similar to other genres. This specificity can be investigated with specialized corpora, which can vary in their coverage according to the research purpose (e.g. corpora of research articles from many disciplines, corpora of the research methods sections of articles on biology). Analyses of frequencies, clusters (or lexical bundles or n-grams) and collocation can then be conducted using corpus software tools to identify the lexicogrammatical features of the specialized genre; keyword analysis in particular, which compares the occurrence of words in a given corpus with that in a reference corpus, can show the unique features of the genre of interest (see, for example, Jaworska, 2017).

Scholars in ESP have sought to understand genres by looking beyond the text itself to explore the broader contexts in which genres operate. For instance, Bhatia's (2015) concept of "critical genre analysis" emphasizes the importance of analyzing both text and context, advocating for research that considers professional practices to better understand "why and how professionals create, disseminate and consume specialized knowledge and exploit available semiotic resources and modes of communication to achieve their professional goals" (p. 14). With a similar aim, other researchers have broadened their focus from textual artifacts to include the perspectives of those actively engaged with the genres under study. Hyland (2005), for example, combined corpus analysis of research articles with interviews of scholars, while Negretti and McGrath (2018) supplemented their textual analysis of student assignments with interviews, gaining insights into the students' experiences and interpretations.

### **Ethnographic Perspectives on Researching ESP**

While early research in ESP drew primarily on text-analytical methods, ethnographically-oriented approaches have gained ground. Ethnography as a method "privileges the direct observation of human behaviour within particular 'cultures' and settings and seeks to understand a social reality from the perspectives of those involved in the observed interactions" (Starfield, 2015, p. 137). Some studies employ full ethnography, such as Dressen Hamouda's (2014) ten-year study on expert writers in Geology, and Mur Dueñas' (2012) work on Finance scholars. Swales (1998) introduced "textography" to describe a method that combines textual/discourse analysis with ethnographic tools such as field notes and participant observation (see also Paltridge, 2008). This approach has pedagogical value. For example, Flowerdew and Wan (2010) conducted on-site observations and interviews with auditors in Hong Kong, alongside a move analysis of audit reports, finding that contextual insights complement move analysis by clarifying which elements are most relevant for teaching and how the writing process unfolds in real-world contexts.

### **Critical Perspectives on ESP**

As with other branches of applied linguistics, ESP has witnessed a "critical turn" (see Starfield, 2025). Viewed through a critical lens, descriptions of ESP as needs-based and pragmatic are subject to challenge; ESP instead becomes "accommodationist," "assimilationist," and even "colonizing" (Belcher, 2006, p. 134). This critical lens underscores issues of equity and power dynamics inherent

in key concepts such as discourse community (e.g. neophytes vs. experts; geographically, centrally positioned members vs. the peripheral) and needs analysis (e.g. the goals of employers prioritized over those of the learners). More broadly, the hegemonic status of the “E” in ESP has been critiqued (e.g. Phillipson, 1992), particularly within EAP and ERPP (see Canagarajah, 2002). The “decolonial” turn raises further questions in its challenge to rethink educational practices rooted in colonial legacies; to critically examine curricula, teaching methodologies, and assessment practices; to expose inequalities and Eurocentric perspectives; and to incorporate indigenous epistemologies and historically marginalized voices (e.g. Kumaravadivelu, 2016). In ESP, this translates as empowering learners “to accept, resist, and even push back, to glocalize the global, asserting ownership of English in forms useful in users’ own communities” (Belcher, 2006, p. 143). From a pedagogical perspective, Benesch’s (2001) critical pedagogy incorporating “rights analysis” speaks to this agenda as does work in ERPP to explore issues of access, power and identity in journal publication (Monteiro & Hirano, 2020) and recognition of multilingual practices (Pérez-Llantada, 2021). Other professional branches of ESP have made fewer inroads when it comes to a critical perspective with some notable exceptions (see, for example, Jaworska, 2023).

## **Technology in ESP**

Given how technologies have radically reshaped the way communities form and communicate (Hafner & Pun, 2020; Kuteeva & Mauranten, 2018), it is not surprising that technological advances have garnered significant attention in ESP. New technologies have impacted what is researched (e.g. genres, communities, modalities); how they are researched (e.g. theorization and methodological tools), as well as what is taught in ESP courses (e.g. the reading and writing of digital genres) and how (e.g. pedagogies that draw on technological innovations).

In ERPP and EAP, genre analyses have been conducted on emergent digital genres and tools such as blogs (Luzón, 2011), Tweets (Luzón, 2023), video/digital abstracts (Belcher, 2023) as well as how the affordances of web technology (such as hyperlinks, content embedding, etc.) are reshaping established genres such as the research article (Pérez-Llantada, 2021). Outcomes of this work include the realization that digital academic genres bring into question some key tenets of genre theory (Askehave & Nielsen, 2005), and a new spotlight on concepts such as genre assemblages, recontextualization, and semiotic remediation (Pérez-Llantada, 2021).

Technological advances have also enabled the development of new research and teaching tools. In terms of the former, the most obvious is the easily accessible wealth of computerized text that is available for analysis using corpus tools. A more ethnographically-oriented example is McGrath’s (2016) study of a collaborative mathematics blog in which she employed virtual non-participant observation to explore writing processes. From the classroom-research perspective, the affordances of web tools such as wikis (Kuteeva, 2011) and blogs (McGrath et al., 2016) for teaching reading and writing have been explored, as well as the challenges ERPP students face in adapting to producing digital genres themselves (e.g. Katsampoxaki-Hodgetts (2024) on digital abstracts).

## **Research-Informed Pedagogy**

ESP is a productive field, with a body of research taking a multitude of approaches and investigating a wide range of linguistic and pedagogical issues. Despite this productivity and the pedagogical implications proposed in research articles, many have commented that more research needs to make

its way into ESP practice and that more concrete ideas for applying research in teaching and materials development are needed (McGrath & Negretti, 2023; Nickerson & Chan, 2024). For research to systematically inform pedagogy, those who are involved in ESP practice (e.g. textbook writers, course designers and frontline teachers) need to be aware of relevant research findings, advised how to incorporate them into materials and methods, and convinced of their effectiveness. Examples of efforts to promote research-informed practice include Chan (2009), which illustrates how findings from both linguistic and pedagogical research on a specific business English topic can be synthesized into accessible frameworks and topic-specific checklists to help practitioners evaluate the authenticity, suitability and effectiveness of teaching materials. These research-informed frameworks and checklists can serve as pedagogical tools for practitioners (Chan, 2024), who can adapt them for their own teaching contexts (e.g. Simpson, 2024). Another example of an initiative to promote a better research-practice interface is a recent special issue on business English in *English for Specific Purposes* (Nickerson & Chan, 2024), which gives not only researchers but also practitioners a voice in an academic journal, through inviting both groups to comment on selected research articles and showcasing practitioners' ideas for incorporating research findings into teaching.

## **Future Directions**

Technological advances have changed the way people communicate in academic, professional and occupational settings. The proliferation of online communication in recent years – for example, the wider use of online classes, business meetings, and medical consultations – means that more research is needed to update our knowledge of the ESP genres that have evolved, as well as illuminating the features of new and multimodal genres. Generative Artificial Intelligence (GenAI), which has begun to influence the way work is done in different professions, necessitates research to shed light on how AI is changing genres, discursive practices, and professional activities. On the pedagogical front, the influence of AI on the way language and professional practices are taught and learned should also be given a prominent place in the ESP research agenda, to help understand changes in teaching and learning processes, and the opportunities and challenges AI brings to ESP teaching practice.

As mentioned above, much ESP genre research aims to identify the unique characteristics of genres. However, the array of (evolving) genres in ESP learners' target situations makes it impossible for all genres to be the subject of published research, which means that the teaching and learning of genres cannot always be informed by existing research. Therefore, ESP research needs to continue to attend to pedagogical questions around how we can develop learners' ability to contend with new genres, raise their genre awareness, and facilitate the transfer of genre knowledge. Another direction for ESP genre research is further examination of how writers or speakers push the boundaries of genres. Although a key aim of genre research is to identify convention (Tardy, 2016), there are varying degrees of space for deviation and creativity. Research revealing how writers/speakers/students subvert convention – and to what extent those deviations are tolerated by interlocutors – will help promote a non-prescriptive view when teaching and learning ESP genres and the development of genre theory.

Writers in various domains of ESP have called for more research-informed pedagogical practice (e.g. Cao & Hu, 2024; Nickerson, 2005). Nickerson and Chan (2024) note that the calls in EBP have mostly urged researchers to suggest ways in which practitioners could apply research, which shows the epistemological belief that researchers are “producers” of knowledge and practitioners are

“consumers” (Sato & Loewen, 2022, p. 512). However, ideas for bringing research closer to pedagogy need not run unidirectionally from researchers to practitioners (Nickerson & Chan, 2024). ESP research would benefit from greater attention to practitioners’ perspectives on the applicability of research and their suggestions for future research directions pertinent to their teaching contexts. Collaboration and the exchange of ideas between researchers, practitioners and researcher-practitioners alike should be encouraged. This work has begun in journals such as the *Journal of English for Academic Purposes* through the “Researching EAP Practice” section, and more similar avenues to publish practice-oriented research (e.g. needs analyses) in other ESP domains would be useful.

## Conclusion

In this entry, we defined ESP and identified the key concepts underpinning much of ESP research to date, namely, genre, discourse community, community of practice, and needs analysis. We also provided an overview of approaches to ESP research, from those focusing on specific ESP genres and their discourse features to ethnographic and critical perspectives that aim to understand and critique the broader contexts in which learners and users of ESP operate. We also identified some ways in which technological advances have impacted ESP research. Using a taxonomy of five types of information relevant to needs, we identified the research approaches and/or methods that can be used by researchers or practitioners to illuminate each type of information, to achieve research-informed pedagogy. We concluded the entry by proposing some future research direction, such as the impact of technological advances on genres and their implications for research and teaching, as well as the role of practitioners in driving research agendas in ESP.

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