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ESP Research Directions: Enduring and Emerging Lines of Inquiry

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Abstract

This paper identifies major strands of research interest in the ESP literature. Specifically, the review aims to highlight mainstay topics that have characterised research in this area as well as topics that are emerging in this field, or that have received rather limited research interest to date. Linguistic inquiry has been a major thrust of research endeavor, and this has largely been driven by the needs of ESP teachers for linguistic descriptions of specialist language use to inform the development of pedagogical descriptions of academic, workplace or professional English for use in instruction. The ESP literature is also rich in case studies of teaching that report practices in one setting. The review identifies a number of topics, such as learning ESP, ESP teaching practices across settings and ESP teacher education needs, which have received scant research interest. It is suggested that these are emerging avenues for research.

Keywords: *Research Topics, Conventional Research Topics, Emerging Research Topics*

This paper examines directions in ESP research from my perspective of working over twenty years as an academic specialising in ESP and EAP. One of the most obvious points to make about ESP research in this period is that there has been a considerable increase in the volume of research publications in this period and that more research from other regions, in addition to UK and US, is now being published. The increase overall in ESP research has led to new journals appearing. *English for Specific Purposes*, which was originally the *ESP Journal*, began publication over four decades ago. The *Journal of English for Academic Purposes* began publication around twenty years ago, and more recently, the *Journal of Research Publication Purposes* has appeared, no doubt due to the volume of research into research writing that has emerged in recent years. Regional and national ESP journals, such as *ASp: La revue du GERAS* (the French ESP journal) and *Ibérica* (the Spanish ESP journal), have also emerged as well as ESP Associations such as the *Languages for specific purposes and*

professional communication association, which promotes and disseminate research in the Asian Pacific region. This current array of sites for ESP research and research dissemination stands in stark contrast to the situation over twenty years ago when my career as an ESP researcher began. The present review aims to identify enduring and emerging lines of inquiry in the ESP research literature. It is broadly organised around two main topics to reflect the distinction in ESP between linguistic inquiry to provide a description of linguistic registers (such as academic English, disciplinary registers, workplace and professional registers) and inquiry to develop curriculum and pedagogy in ESP (Gollin-Kies, Hall, & Moore, 2015).

One enduring focus of ESP research is linguistic inquiry carried out to provide descriptions of academic, professional or workplace English. Often the inquiries have often been motivated by teaching needs — the needs of ESP teachers to provide language descriptions for second language learners. A very recent example of this can be seen in the study by Kithulgoda and Mendis (2020), which analysed move structure and sentence grammar in a corpus of *special occasion speeches*, a previously explored genre. Findings from the study were used to inform the development of teaching materials on a Business English course. One trend in this line of inquiry has been the increase in research into vocabulary, which has been underpinned by developments in corpus analytic software and techniques. Green and Lambert (2019), for example, identify content word phrases, such as *gamma rays* and *amino acids* in secondary school textbooks in school subjects. Findings were used to produce a set of secondary phrase lists for pedagogical purposes. Within this line of inquiry, studies have sought to identify the vocabulary learners need for a study, academic or work area. Le and Miller's study (2020) focuses on the vocabulary needed by students of medicine, and that of Bi (2020) focuses on the vocabulary undergraduate students of computer science in China need to read their specialist textbooks.

Although the primary driver of ESP linguistic inquiry has often been teaching needs, such needs do not account for all linguistic inquiry. Research has inquired into special purpose language use to develop an understanding of patterns of language use in relation to social or disciplinary factors. Of late, some researchers have investigated changes and developments of special purpose language over time. This is seen in the work of Hyland and Jiang (2018) who track the use of metadiscourse (commentary on text made by the text's producer) in research articles at three time periods in the last 50 years. This diachronic analysis found significant differences over time in the relative use of the two main categories of metadiscoursal devices under investigation and differences in how they were used in soft and hard science disciplines across time. The use of hype, hyperbolic and subjective language in articles reporting randomised controlled trials in medical research was the topic of a recent study (Millar, Salager-Meyer & Budgell, 2019). Findings revealed that hype was used most frequently in the discussion sections of the articles to extol the research methodology. Linguistic inquiry that aims to throw light on social and disciplinary aspects of communication contributes to the development of understanding of the linguistic practices of disciplines, professions and workplaces. This topic is expected to continue to attract research interest in the coming years.

One early linguistic analysis of disciplinary English is that reported in Tarone et al. (1981). This seminal work has had a major impact on me personally as well as the field of ESP in general. Tarone et al. (1981) investigated the use of the passive in research articles in

astrophysics. The study unearthed specific uses that the passive which could be explained with reference to research aims and practices in this discipline. It provided a close-grained description of the functions of a grammatical structure in research writing in the discipline. As well as its contribution to linguistic description of a disciplinary register and genre, the study demonstrated to the ESP community the value of this thrust of inquiry.

Readers will likely have noticed that most of the studies described above have focused on academic English. Academic English has been the predominant focus of ESP linguistic inquiry. As a result, far more description of academic registers and genres is currently available compared to the description of professional registers and workplace genres. There has been a superabundance of research into research articles, which can be explained not only in relation to the importance of this genre but also because of the relative accessibility to the data. ESP researchers generally work in academic settings and therefore have access to academic sites for research. There are often questions about confidentiality in the use of linguistic data from professional and workplace settings whereas academic genres, especially research articles are often easy to access or are in the public domain. Moreover, ESP researchers are usually familiar with academic discourse, especially the discourse of disciplines they have studied or worked in, such as linguistics and education. They have background knowledge of it and can understand the discourse without the need for consultation with experts. Nonetheless, some ESP linguistic inquiry has ventured into workplace and professional settings as seen in two recent ESP inquiries in tourism English. Suau-Jiménez (2019) investigated the discourse of hotel websites and ways hoteliers adjust the websites in response to online reviews. Wilson (2018) investigated the pragmatic strategies used in interaction in a tourist information office in France. It is hoped that professional and workplace registers and genres will attract more research interest in the future. It is hoped that professional and workplace registers will attract further ESP research attention in the future.

ESP initially grew out of endeavors to teach English to second or foreign language learners to help them enter or progress in their work or study domains. Many ESP teachers were originally ESOL teachers before they moved into ESP. These two background factors help explain the enduring interest in this topic in the ESP research literature. A characteristic form of such ESP inquiry is the reporting of an innovative teaching practice or a course design in a case setting, often the authors' own institution. To illustrate, Henderson and Cauldwell (2020) describe a course in listening decoding skills that they devised for their ESP students of Psychology. The report details the profile of their students, the need for such instruction, the design of the course and its delivery, including materials and assessment design. Similarly, Stojković (2020) reports an ESP course in legal English and the discussion-based teaching methodology and sequence of instruction she used in instruction targeting persuasiveness in legal discourse. Examples of teaching practices in case settings such as these play an important role in providing fresh ideas to ESP practitioners. Such studies can also serve as an impetus for new research. The innovations reported in the case setting become the topic of inquiry as others attempt to implement or evaluate the new pedagogy in a different setting or site.

A mainstay topic of ESP research inquiry is analysis of learners' needs. ESP teaching differs from teaching English for general purposes in that it aims to address the specific needs of the group of learners at hand (or the individual learner at hand) in relation to their target work or study setting. Although the development of general English courses often involves consideration of learners' needs, the level of detail about needs in ESP course development is usually much higher and a systematic approach is used. Over the years, the focus of ESP research into needs analysis has changed. Whereas, earlier studies, such as Basturkmen (1998) tended to report findings from an analysis of learner needs, current literature highlights the emergence of fine-tuned foci of investigation, ever more sophisticated methodologies in investigation of needs (Long, 2005; Serafini, Lake & Long, 2015) and critical perspectives of the topic (Johns & Makalela, 2011). A fine-tuned analysis is seen in Malmström, Pecorari and Shaw's (2018) contrastive analysis of students' receptive versus productive academic vocabulary needs. A sophisticated approach to investigating needs is illustrated in a recent study that used multiple sources and methods and triangulation of findings to identify the academic English language needs of postgraduate students of psychology university settings in Iran (Atai & Hejazi, 2019).

Most often ESP course developers investigate what learners will need to know or be able to do in the target setting, target situation analysis. In devising an ESP course for a group of students of economics, for example, the teacher or course developer would typically carry out a target situation analysis to identify the tasks and functions the learners will need to perform their role in the setting and the kinds of language knowledge they will require. In addition to target situation analysis, the teacher or course developer may conduct a present situation analysis to identify the learners' current ability to perform functions and tasks in the target situation. This typically involves assessing the learners' current level of competence with the level required for successful participation in their work or study area. The information obtained from the analyses can be used to design an ESP course or materials.

A further strand of inquiry within the area of needs analysis is inquiry into learner language. Thirakunkovit et al.'s (2019) study investigated the oral English proficiency of international teaching assistants (ISAs) in a US university setting. This study examined the assistants' performance on an English proficiency test that was used to screen prospective ISAs with lower than required TOEFL speaking scores. Findings were used to determine the language focus of instructional materials to support this group. Myskow and Underwood (2020) investigated how causality was expressed in high- and low-graded essays by university students in an English Medium Instruction course in International Relations in a university setting in Japan. Findings revealed a greater range of linguistic resources for expressing causality in the higher-grade essays. Findings had pedagogical implications for how to focus instruction on causal explanations in subsequent ESP teaching.

It will be clear from the above review that currently a good deal of linguistic inquiry is being given to very specific topics. Often research concerns investigation of language use in a specific discipline or genre. That language use and genre practices vary across academic disciplines, is now well established in this field. It is expected that this line of inquiry will continue as researchers seek to develop further the body of linguistic information about disciplinary variants of academic English. One gap in this line of inquiry is that limited

attention is sometimes given to why certain linguistic features are used. Rather too much attention is given, in my opinion, to description of *what* linguistic features are used or *what* moves are found in a genre at the expense of explanation as to the reason behind these choices. What motivates academic writers and speakers to use language in these ways? Tarone et al. (1981) pondered what lay behind the uses of the passive in their data and they consulted specialist informants to glean insights into the disciplinary members' aims and intentions in this genre. In short, there is a place, I believe, for more research to pursue why questions (why specific purposes language choices are made) to supplement the what questions (what linguistic choices or forms are used).

Reports of innovative practices in a case setting are a characteristic form of report in the ESP literature on pedagogy. As I have argued above, these reports have a good deal of value in developing teaching practices in the field and inspiring teachers in other settings to try out new practices in their own work. Missing, or in little evidence, is a focus on ESP teaching practices across settings. We do not know for example how widespread certain teaching practices might be. It has long been argued that there is no one size fits all teaching methodology in ESP (Dudley-Evans & St. John, 1998). However, I would suspect that certain practices or activity types are common across settings. For example, language analysis type teaching/learning activities that explicitly draw learners' attention to ways English is used in a genre or disciplinary variant of a genre are probably common. However, this is mere speculation. It would be of interest to see what range of activity types are typically used across settings in general, or across settings in teaching a learner type, such as learners who have or do not have experience of working or studying in their target disciplines or workplaces. One of the limitations of the current predilection towards reporting a teaching innovation in the researchers' own case setting is that the successful implementation of the practice may be dependent on the teacher/researcher having a background of specialist knowledge. This point was made by Chen and Flowerdew (2018). These researchers report a teaching implementation to deliver workshops in instruction on doctoral writing to students across university settings in Hong Kong. The workshops included corpus-based methods of instruction, a method which had been hitherto largely been reported in small-scale settings in which the teachers have experienced corpus linguists or language educators with a good grounding in corpus linguistics. This study examines the potential value of corpus-based methods in teaching specific purposes writing in a wide-scale project.

Pedagogy-focused ESP literature has largely examined teaching initiatives, and relatively limited attention has been given to the topic of learning processes, or how learning a specific purposes language occurs. Theoretical examination of this topic in the ESP literature is scant and notions of how specific purposes are acquired are yet to be developed in this field. There has been a limited amount of empirical research. Belcher (2013: 545-546) commented that “[p]ossibly because ESP has so much faith in the value of the materials and task developed in response to well-executed needs analyses, few ESP studies have focused on teacher efficacy and closely examined the relationship between teaching and learning.” Research into the relationship between ESP teaching and learning is needed. There is also a need for research of naturalistic learning of specific purpose language — how specific purpose languages (registers of English) are acquired in real-world settings (not in ESP classrooms). An example

of research in this direction can be seen in a recent study (Woydack & Lockwood, 2020: 159) which investigated the “affordances” provided by naturally occurring call centre interaction that appeared to facilitate the specific purposes language acquisition of the multilingual staff working in the centre. More research is needed to develop the field’s understanding of learning processes in instructed ESP and in naturalistic settings.

Finally, ESP teacher education is an emerging line of inquiry. The field of ESP has until recently been much concerned with identifying learners’ needs for academic, workplace or professional English and rather unconcerned with developing an understanding of the needs of ESP practitioners for teacher education. One recent book (Papadima-Sophocleous, Constantinou & Giannikas (2019: 2) describes the “unanimously” prevailing view across the limited existing literature on ESP teacher education that there is a need for more ESP teacher education opportunities and more research on which to base it. This line of inquiry is one that will hopefully draw more research interest in the coming years.

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