Historical overview

The emergence of ESP

Learning and teaching English for specific rather than general purposes is an approach that began to develop during and after World War II and has shown continued growth since. Its origins are to be found in the enormous social changes and massive economic development that occurred with what has been called the third wave of globalisation (Robertson in Kumaravadivelu, 2006) as Europe struggled to rebuild itself post-1945 and newly independent Asian and African countries sought to modernise. The growth of multinational capitalism during this period and the emergence of the United States of America as a global superpower also encouraged the development of English for specific purposes (ESP) teaching. At the same time, ideologies of progress and the desire to facilitate international communication, understanding and student exchange in the hope of helping to prevent future wars were also influential in ESP’s establishment. These somewhat contradictory aims and intentions are at the heart of ESP and are the focus of some recent critiques which will be discussed in this chapter (see also Starfield (2013b) for further discussion).

The ESP learner is not learning the language for general educative purposes or for the study of literature in which the language is the subject matter of the course, but rather as a means to the “acquisition of some quite different body of knowledge or set of skills” (Robinson, 1980: 6). Context and content thus became key issues in ESP pedagogy – in what context would the learner be using the language skills and what content would she or he need to access through the language (Starfield, 2013a). ESP was perceived by many ELT educators as a radical break with previous approaches; Strevens (1977: 146), for example, linked ESP to a “major, world-wide educational tide of change”.

Growth of the field

From the 1960s onwards, ESP saw sustained growth and began to make a substantial contribution to the field of language learning and teaching. ESP was intended to meet the communication needs of rapidly industrialising nations, overcoming local barriers to communication, often by promoting ‘global’ languages such as English at the expense of local languages, and contributing to the growth of multinational corporations. In line with the modernisation agenda, ESP was also seen as more efficient, being targeted to the specific needs of the learners for their
workplaces or academic settings. Benesch cites a presentation by Strevens at a 1971 conference on ‘Adult English for National Development’ held in Beirut: “The profession can now say . . . to the oil industry or to a shipping firm or even to a government . . . describe accurately the precise achievement in English that you require, we can ‘engineer’ a system that will reach this target” (Strevens, 1971, cited in Benesch, 2001: 30).

Organisations such as the British Council, the Ford Foundation, and the United States Information Agency were also actively involved in promoting ESP, contributing to the establishment of English as the dominant language of science, technology and commerce (Hutchinson and Waters, 1987; Benesch, 2001). Many of the early advocates of ESP cited in this chapter, such as Swales, Dudley-Evans and Robinson, developed their ESP approaches in newly independent states, often working on British Council-funded projects, while much of the early dissemination of their work and the work of others in the new field was through British Council publications in the ELT Documents series (see Robinson, 1980, for a comprehensive bibliography, and Swales, 1985a). The link to the postcolonial context is explicit in The Linguistic Sciences and Language Teaching (Halliday et al., 1964), an influential text that set out an agenda for ESP based on functional linguistics, in particular the study of register. The authors clearly articulate ESP’s intention to provide an approach to language learning and teaching that distinguishes itself from traditional general purposes language teaching:

only the merest fraction of investigation has yet been carried out into just what parts of a conventional course in English are needed by . . . power station engineers in India, or police inspectors in Nigeria; even less is known about precisely what extra specialised material is required.

(Halliday et al., 1964: 189)

Register analysis

While Halliday et al. identify need and context as important categories, in their view, the task of the linguist was to carry out “detailed studies of restricted language and special registers” based on “large samples of the language used by the particular person concerned” (ibid.: 190). The importance of what came to be called ‘authentic’ texts – texts that learners were likely to encounter in their work or study situation – is also evident in their thinking. Halliday and colleagues’ emphasis on specific sublanguages or registers was seminal to the development of the many ESP subfields that are still studied and taught today – for example, English for medical purposes; English for law; English for nursing; English for science and technology; English for academic purposes (EAP) (see Basturkmen and Wette, this volume); and occupational sublanguages such as English for business/occupational purposes and vocational/workplace English.

The initial focus of ESP on the language for science and technology was not surprising, as there was a “postwar boom in funding for sciences and technology by the United States and the United Kingdom [that] included subsidies for English language teaching” (Benesch, 2001: 5). English for science and technology (EST) research was influenced by register analysis and consisted of frequency studies of lexical items and grammatical features of science texts. Textbooks developed on the basis of register analysis include A Course in Basic Scientific English, from a study of three million words of modern scientific English (Ewer and Latorre, 1969). This approach has been criticised for confining its analysis to sentence level; the restricted range of grammar and lexis; the lack of authenticity of the reading passages; the focus on form at the expense of meaning and communication; and whether special registers could, in fact, be clearly identified (Robinson, 1980; Dudley-Evans and St John, 1998).
**A rhetorical/functional approach**

Partly as a response to the difficulties experienced with register analysis, and under the influence of communicative approaches to language teaching and theoretical frameworks such as speech act theory and functional linguistics, applied linguists began to examine texts beyond the level of the sentence in terms of their overall discourse structure and their rhetorical purpose or communicative function. *Industrial English* (Jupp and Hodlin, 1975) adopted a functional approach to analysing the language needed by factory workers in the UK, clearly moving away from the linguistic/structural syllabus to focus on what people do with language in the workplace. The nine volume *English in Focus* series (edited by Allen and Widdowson from 1974–1980) featured textbooks in areas such as physical science, mechanical engineering, medical science, education, social science and biology. The series followed a rhetorical/functional approach that saw scientific discourse as a set of rhetorical acts such as defining, classifying and exemplifying. This early interest in texts and the relationship between form and function laid the foundation for the development of studies of genre and the concept of discourse community, which have become central to ESP (see Swales, 1990, and further discussion here).

These early approaches to ESP were based on the belief that identifying the specific variety of language or discourse functions of the particular domain of future study would meet the learners’ communicative needs and sustain student motivation. As most ESP learners were adults, they were also assumed to have more clearly identifiable needs than younger learners. Needs analysis was used to carry out target situation analysis in order to specify the communicative language functions required within the specific context and develop appropriate syllabus content (Hutchinson and Waters, 1987; Benesch, 2001). Munby’s (1978) *Communicative Syllabus Design* attempted to provide a more theoretically informed and systematic approach to needs analysis through detailed lists of micro-functions which the ESP practitioner would need to identify prior to syllabus development. Although largely discounted today, the approach had the merit of placing needs analysis, situation, function and context at centre stage in ESP, alerting ESP practitioners to the multiple variables that needed to be considered when adopting a communicative approach. The more sophisticated needs analyses approaches in use today have evolved in part as a reaction to Munby’s work.

Munby’s needs analysis model used a pre-course analysis that the course developer carried out prior to implementation. In contrast, in Richterich and Chancerel’s (1977) influential approach (developed for the Council of Europe to identify the needs of adults learning a foreign language), needs analysis is an ongoing process, not a one-off event carried out prior to the commencement of a course. Crucially, they not only focussed on the language needed in the target situation but also emphasised the role of ‘present situation analysis’, drawing attention to the gap between what students could currently do with the language and what they needed or wanted to be able to do at the end of the course. In this approach, the learners, the educational institution and the employer separately identify their needs, which may include available resources, objectives, curriculum and teaching methods. Methods used are largely quantitative and include surveys and questionnaires and content analyses but also non-directive interviews, language attitude scales and job analyses.

**An established field**

By 1981, with the founding of the first scholarly journal devoted entirely to English for specific purposes (known then as the *ESP Journal* and today as *English for Specific Purposes*), ESP could be said to have become an established field of study within English language teaching. Johns (2013:...
6), however, points out that, “unlike many other research areas in theoretical and applied linguistics, ESP has been, at its core, a practitioners’ movement” with a focus on “establishing, through careful research, the needs and relevant discourse features for a targeted group of students”. While these concerns continue to drive much ESP research, as Hewings (2002) notes in his survey of articles published in *English for Specific Purposes* between 1981–2001, papers on course design, which proliferated in the earlier years, decreased over the period; meanwhile, empirical studies with a focus on written textual or discourse analysis became the norm. In all likelihood, this was due to the growing professionalisation and specialisation of the field and its need to meet established university definitions of research as, by the early 2000s, the journal was listed on the *Social Sciences Citation Index* (SSCI) (Hewings, 2002). Hewings also notes a decline in the proportion of papers that looked at ESP in general and a corresponding increase in papers on English for occupational purposes (EOP), particularly in business contexts. The biggest change, however, was the increase in papers dealing with EAP, to the extent that about 80 per cent of papers in later volumes focused on this area. This is more than likely due to most scholars being based in academia, where research and publication are an expectation (Flowerdew and Peacock, 2001). As EAP is the subject of a separate chapter in this *Handbook* (see Basturkmen and Wette, this volume), the focus in this chapter is on the sub-field known as EOP, which has a workplace and professional orientation. However, as Flowerdew and Peacock (2001) point out, there is no neat dividing line between EAP and EOP; categories may overlap, as when English classes for medical students could be considered to be preparing them for both their academic study but also their professional practice.

### Current issues

In an overview of developments in ESP through the last decade of the twentieth century into the early years of the twenty-first century, Belcher (2006: 135) comments that there would probably be agreement that “needs assessment, content-based teaching methods, and content-area informed instructors have long been considered essential to the practice of specific-purposes language teaching”. She goes on to point out that contemporary processes of globalisation are, at the same time, rendering these notions increasingly more complex. Learners are often mobile, diverse, multilingual populations with rapidly evolving needs, and our understandings of content and contexts are becoming more nuanced through the use of diverse methodologies and theories not only of language learning but of the relationships of individuals to society. Above all, the role of English has changed most dramatically from the early days of ESP sketched out above, as it has become the international lingua franca of business, industry and science (Kassim and Ali, 2010; Nickerson, 2013). Current issues in needs analysis and the roles of content and context are discussed in more detail below.

### Needs analysis

While needs analysis can be seen as the “foundation on which all other decisions are, or should be, made” (Belcher, 2006: 135), that is, “the means of establishing the how and what of a course” (Hyland, 2006: 73 emphasis in original), understandings of needs analysis have evolved considerably from the early years described above. The ‘objective’ language needs of students in the target situation remain important, but interest in learners’ more subjective needs, wants, larger life goals, motivations and investment in the communities they seek to join has widened the scope of needs analysis (Belcher, 2006; Norton, 2013). For example, the practising engineers surveyed by Kassim and Ali (2010: 179) identified English competency as essential to their desire to become “global engineers” and saw English as a “tool for self and professional development”.

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Hutchinson and Waters (1987: 54) had critiqued what they saw as a “language centred approach” to target situation analysis which used subject area texts to produce lists of linguistic features to be learnt, often leading to materials that were demotivating for students. They focussed instead on the learning needs of the learner: what the learner needs to do in order to learn. They argued that teachers needed to focus on the underlying competencies and learning skills that lecturers assume students will have and which should enable them to reach the target performance rather than concentrate simply on linguistic features of specialised texts. In arguing against the existence of specialised varieties of English, Hutchinson and Waters can be seen to favour what has become known as a ‘common core’ approach to ESP rather than a highly subject-specific one, which has obvious implications for the role of the ESP teacher (Dudley-Evans and St John, 1998 and later in this chapter).

Thus, needs analysis is now understood as an ongoing, iterative process that continues through course delivery as teachers learn more about their students’ learning needs and which may actively engage learners themselves in the needs analysis process (Dudley-Evans and St John, 1998; Hyland, 2006; Flowerdew, 2013). As our understandings of needs become more complex, so do our understandings of the contexts in which learners will be learning the language. As a consequence, the traditional methods of stakeholder surveys, interviews and text analysis are felt to be less than adequate. Moving beyond the language focus of the first wave of ESP studies, Swales (1985b: 219) stressed the need for ESP practitioners to both grasp the “conceptual structures of the disciplines and occupations” they are supporting as well as understand the “conventions of conduct that organise vocational and organisational life”, urging them to engage in “thick description” and “ethnographic sleuthing”. While Swales (1985b: 219) is often viewed as a major proponent of a text-focused approach to ESP, he has long been interested in ethnographic approaches to understanding needs, arguing that “it is not only texts that we need to understand, but the roles texts have in their environments; the values . . . placed on them by occupational, professional and disciplinary memberships; and the expectations those memberships have of . . . the genres they participate in”.

Ethnographically oriented methods are therefore starting to be used in ESP needs analysis. These draw on insider understandings and triangulate multiple perspectives through observation, in-depth interviewing and other forms of data collection (see, for example, Bosher and Smalkoski, 2002), although, as Cowling (2007) points out, real-world constraints such as limited time often complicate the carrying out of more in-depth observation in EOP settings.

Critical needs analysis goes a step further, examining the unequal power relations in any institutionally based learning–teaching situation. Benesch’s (2001: 108) call for “rights analysis” – a tool for “teachers and students to consider possible responses to unfavourable social, intuitional, and classroom conditions” – has highlighted that learners’ needs and desires are frequently subordinated to institutions or corporations’ dominant needs. Jasso-Aguilar (1999) adopted a critical ethnographic approach to needs analysis in the hotel industry, carrying out participant observation of the daily routines of maids in a Waikiki hotel in order to research their language needs. The multimethod approach adopted in this study drew on multiple sources and revealed a clear disjuncture between the hotel managers’ views of the English needed by the maids and the maids’ own understandings of their needs. Goldstein (1997) carried out a similar investigation on a factory assembly line in Toronto in order to establish the English needs of a group of immigrant workers. Her critical perspectives, intensive observation and the triangulation of multiple data sources helped explain why many of the workers were reluctant to embrace a programme designed to improve their English skills and their ability to participate in Canadian society.

While ESP initially relied on register analysis and functional notional analyses of language use to assist in the identification of learners’ language-based needs, the 1980s saw the birth and
continued growth of genre analysis. Genre analysis replaced the narrower understandings of language as register, adding to the complexity of needs analysis as students’ socio-rhetorical needs in specific discourse communities needed to be addressed (Swales, 1990). Analysis of how specific genres are realised and function within these communities is now a key component of ESP needs analysis. A distinctive ESP school of genre analysis based primarily on the work of Swales and Bhatia emerged in the 1990s (Swales, 1990; Bhatia, 1993, 2004; Hyon, 1996). Genres are seen as staged communicative events which move through a series of prototypical stages called moves and steps in their realisation, and are the properties of specific discourse communities who use them to further their communicative purposes. Genres are also identifiable through their use of conventionalised language forms to realise specific communicative functions. Professional genres examined include corporate disclosure documents, letters of application, newspaper law reports, emails in multinational corporations, sales letters and popularised medical texts (Bargiela-Chiappini and Nickerson, 1999; Paltridge, 2013). Genre-based pedagogies are now a regular component of ESP teaching, as ESP practitioners carry out genre analysis of key genres learners will need to perform in the target situation, sometimes drawing on computerised corpus analysis tools (Henry and Roseberry, 2001; Upton and Connor, 2001).

More recently, rhetorical genre studies (Bawarshi and Reiff, 2010) have attracted the attention of ESP researchers. Such studies adopt more ethnographic approaches to genre analysis, focussing on the activities, attitudes, beliefs, values and patterns of behaviour of the discourse community using the genres being studied rather than on rhetorical structure or language patterns. In a study of how company audit reports are produced, Flowerdew and Wan (2010) fruitfully combined genre analysis with ethnographic observation and in-depth interviews with key informants at the Hong Kong branch of a large international accounting firm.

Contents and contexts

Closely linked to uncovering learners’ needs is the development of learning materials and methods that enable “needs-responsive instruction” (Belcher, 2009: 3) that will assist students in the learning context and with the multiple purposes identified through the needs analysis. Ready-made, generic materials may thus not prove helpful in responding to the specific needs identified through the needs analysis (Belcher, 2009). While Dudley-Evans and St. John (1998) state that the content of ESP courses should not be language but that content should function as a carrier of language, the challenge for the ESP practitioner is to identify this carrier content and ensure that it is motivating for the students. Consequently, ESP courses have been described as having either a narrow-angle or a wide-angle approach to content selection (Dudley-Evans and St. John, 1998; Basturkmen, 2006; Belcher, 2006). Narrow-angled courses are aimed at learners with broadly similar needs and tend to be quite specialised in their subject matter, for example, pilots and nurses (Basturkmen, 2006), while wider-angled course are less specialised and aimed at learners who needs are less similar. Narrow-angled courses may put ESP teachers at a disadvantage, as their students may know more about the subject area than they do (Dudley-Evans and St. John, 1998; Belcher, 2009), so wide-angled, more general approaches are often preferred by ESP teachers for this very reason (Belcher, 2006). Narrow-angle approaches may work better with students in EOP settings (Belcher, 2009), the implication being that the teacher may need to become more familiar with domain knowledge (see Northcott, 2009).

Belcher (2009: 2) noted that the “fastest growing branches of EOP are those associated with professions that are themselves constantly expanding and generating offshoots”: business communication, legal English and health care. Business English or English for business purposes or, more recently, business discourse (see Bargiela-Chiappini and Zhang, 2013) was historically
under-researched as compared to science and technology, especially in discourse terms, but is now a rapidly expanding field of research. Key factors driving this expansion have been the dominance of Western business culture and the associated dominance of English under globalisation. English has become the lingua franca of global business, giving rise to extensive use of what is known as business English as a Lingua Franca (BELF) where English is used as a means of communication between speakers who are not native English speakers and do not share another native language (see Seargeant, this volume). While St. John (1996: 15) was able to refer to business English as “a materials-led movement rather than a research-led movement”, there is now a considerable amount of research into both business English and business discourse (Nickerson and Planken, 2016). Key genres such as negotiations, meetings, business email and oral presentations have all been studied by ESP researchers (see for example Gimenez, 2000; Louhiala-Salminen et al., 2005; Nickerson, 2005; Planken, 2005). While initial work focused on written texts, currently there is growing interest in spoken business genres (Rogerson-Revell, 2007; Planken and Nickerson, 2009; Evans, 2013).

The extent to which these findings are being taken into account in business English textbooks has been the focus of research which has identified a gap between the findings of applied linguistics studies and textbook depictions of communicative events such as, for example, meetings (Williams, 1988; Chan, 2009). Cheng and Warren (2005) found discrepancies between the treatment of certain speech acts in Hong Kong business English textbooks and the ways English was used in the Hong Kong Corpus of Spoken English business sub-corpus. Similarly, Gimenez (2000), comparing email and formal business letters produced in one company, found that the standard business letter format taught in a business English class would not prepare the students to produce appropriate email correspondence. Studies such as Bhatia and Candlin’s (2001) multi-method needs analysis of business communication across several Hong Kong tertiary institutions have found similar mismatches between university courses and the skills needed in the workplace. Likewise, Crosling and Ward’s (2002) comparison of typical university oral presentations with those in the workplace showed a mismatch with the ‘real world’, less formal styles common to the workplace.

Consulting domain experts has also proved helpful in course development. In order to develop an English programme at a large Japanese company, Cowling (2007) surveyed former trainees, now employed, about their English usage in the workplace. Somewhat unexpectedly, they reported the need for ‘small talk’ in important work situations such as interacting with foreign guests. They also reported that the language taught in previous business English classes at the company had not prepared them for the reality of language use in business meetings and that they would like more ‘authentic’ content.

In some domains, where English acts as a lingua franca, ESP training can have dramatic real world consequences. Wozniak’s (2010) study of the English language skills needed by certified mountain guides in the French Alps highlights the importance of communication skills for guides in this potentially hazardous occupation. Similarly, aviation English – a highly specialised language used by pilots and flight engineers in the cockpit – is proving a domain of increasing interest in ESP research (Moder, 2013; Estival et al., 2016).

New needs emerge regularly in EOP as new contexts for English language use emerge in the rapidly globalising world of business; the growth in outsourcing to call centres in countries such as India and the Philippines is a case in point. A growing body of research is examining the language training needs of call centre operatives who are required to communicate telephonically in English, often with native speakers, under quite demanding and stressful conditions (Forey and Lockwood, 2007; Lockwood, 2012; Friginal, 2013).

Also of growing significance is the increasing use of technology in occupational and professional settings and the corresponding emergence of new genres or genre variants. In the multinational
Malaysian engineering workplace, Kassim and Ali (2010) found that teleconferencing was the oral communicative event in which English was most used, yet as their university did not possess this technology, they were unable to provide training for their students in this key area. In the modules developed on the basis of their needs analysis, they developed task-based scenarios for ESP training to simulate the workplace contexts in which engineering graduates would be likely to find themselves in, focusing on topics such as networking externally with clients, which requires highly developed oral communication skills. In fact, the communicative needs of engineers in contemporary professional workplace contexts have been found to include both engineering and business discourse, posing the considerable challenge to the ESP practitioner of developing courses that can meet the multiple needs of engineers using English in the global workplace (Spence and Liu, 2013).

Who should teach ESP?

Given the breadth of areas covered by ESP instruction, it is reasonable to ask who can teach ESP and how much content knowledge ESP professionals need. As mentioned above, Belcher (2006) refers to “content-area informed instructors”, highlighting the many roles an ESP practitioner can be called upon to play – from needs assessor to curriculum and authentic materials developer, with the flexibility to cope with many different content areas. Many ESP teachers have humanities backgrounds which do not necessarily equip them well for the challenge of ESP teaching, and, although growing rapidly in number and extent, ESP components of graduate ELT programmes are still relatively limited. In Belcher’s (2009) view, ESP instructors should show a willingness to “enter as a stranger into strange domains”, as Sullivan and Girginer (2002) did in recording interactions in an airport control tower when asked to deliver an ESP programme in a civil aviation school in Turkey, where students were training to become pilots and air traffic controllers.

The degree of subject area knowledge required by language teachers and their relationship with content-area specialists and specialised texts are issues that continue to be posed in ESP. Flowerdew (2013: 339) comments that, in many EOP settings, courses are delivered by ‘discipline-based practitioners’ rather than ESP specialists. Master (2005), however, is of the view that ESP instructors are better prepared than content instructors in most settings, apart from highly specialised contexts like air traffic control. Team-teaching with a subject specialist, language and content integration, and linked courses (Kotecha et al., 1990; Dudley-Evans and St. John, 1998; Benesch, 2001) are some solutions that have been implemented in response to narrow-angle course needs. In the highly specialised contexts of legal English, for example, Northcott (2009) recommends the development of an equal partnership between ESP practitioner and legal specialist. Hyland (2002) argues for specificity as the cornerstone of ESP but does acknowledge that institutional constraints may hamper this.

New methodologies such as corpus studies (see Frankenberg-Garcia, this volume) are, however, making knowledge of professional discourse more widely available, and technologies such as video are making real world data and settings much more accessible and available for the production of teaching materials (Belcher, 2004). More qualitative approaches such as ethnography, used in combination with new technologies, can also help provide the ESP practitioner and researcher with access to authentic data for classroom use and research purposes, thereby mitigating the lack of insider knowledge.

ESP, ideology and neutrality

This chapter has highlighted the global desire for English, seen by many as the gateway to increased opportunity. At the same time, we should acknowledge that the spread of English can,
as Belcher (2006: 143) reminds us, open the door to a “form of domination”. Master (2005: 112) similarly evokes “the double-edged sword ESP practitioners wield in representing the most powerful nations on the planet while addressing the increasing demand for instruction in English as the lingua franca of the learning and working world”. As Nickerson (2005) points out, the linguistic realities of the contemporary workplace are complex; English is used by first, second and foreign language speakers, often in co-existence with one or more other languages, and has effectively become the lingua franca of world business. Many have, however, questioned whether English can in fact play the role of a neutral lingua franca when it is associated with the negative experiences of colonialism, exploitation, dispossession and war (Pennycook, 1994; also, Pennycook, this volume). Indigenous business cultures, for example, may be disappearing as English and ‘Western’ business culture become dominant in the workplaces of Expanding Circle countries (Kachru, 1985). Nickerson (2013: 451) argues that the field needs to move beyond native speaker models and understand more about what constitutes “functional nativeness” in lingua franca contexts. Of course, as in ELT more generally, the majority of ESP practitioners across the globe are not native speakers, and those who research and write about ESP are increasingly located in Expanding Circle countries. Out of 19 articles published in the 2013 volume of *English for Specific Purposes*, over one third were authored by non-native speakers located in Expanding Circle countries underlining the extent to which ESP is no longer the exclusive ‘property’ of native speakers. (See also Llurda, this volume, for discussion of the contested and contentious term ‘native speaker’).

While in 1994, Swales could note that the field of ESP had been “strikingly unengaged by . . . issues of ideology . . . and learners’ rights” (1994: 201), in the decades since, critical approaches to ESP have foregrounded these concerns, and many practitioners and researchers are sensitive to these perceptions about English and their role (Master, 2005; Belcher, 2006). Thus, the extent to which ESP practitioners and researchers should adopt a more critical stance towards the role of English and the role of ESP more broadly is an ongoing topic of debate. It has been argued, for example, that the dominant ideology of ESP seeks to help learners fit into rather than challenge existing power structures and economic realities (Starfield, 2013b).

Related to these issues are concerns about the potential restrictiveness of ESP in terms of access to limited discourses and lexis; the extent to which learner empowerment is a goal of ESP; and the extent to which ESP restricts learner access to the multiple identities and imagined communities that might enable them to thrive more than simply survive (Belcher, 2004). For example, a study of Cantonese-speaking bank personnel revealed that they felt inadequate and disempowered when speaking English, as they were not able to respond as quickly as those around them, either because they lacked appropriate discourse strategies or used a different set of strategies because of their cultural background (Chew, 2005). The move to discourse–based approaches that include socio-pragmatics may help to reduce this sense of disempowerment (Bargiela-Chiappini and Zhang, 2013). Nickerson (2005: 369) recommended “identifying those strategies that can be associated with effective communication in business, regardless of whether the speaker/writer is a native or non-native speaker”, pointing to a shift in focus in English for specific business purposes from language skills to language strategy.

**Future developments**

The most significant developments in ESP since the early days outlined above have without doubt been the rise in English as a global language, and the concomitant realisation that native speaker models will become less relevant and that a degree of competence in English is now considered a basic constituent of a person’s general education (Nickerson, 2013; Seargeant, this
volume). Nickerson (2013) has predicted a shift towards the development of English lingua franca models rather than native speaker ones in business and workplace contexts. Corpora such as VOICE (the Vienna-Oxford International Corpus of English at https://www.univie.ac.at/voice/page/index.php) will provide instances of spoken interaction that may help drive these changes. In conjunction with this shift, the increasing use of multimodal and hybrid genres in these contexts will challenge ESP practitioners, researchers and learners. Clear distinctions between spoken and written discourse will blur, and research into these emerging genres is urgently needed.

As outlined above, needs analyses have become increasingly more sophisticated and multi-dimensional. Yet as the cornerstone of the ESP approach to curriculum development, needs analysis will need to continually broaden its scope to deal with the increasingly complex contexts in which learners are located. Belcher and Lukkarila (2011), for instance, called for needs analysis to broaden its focus on the learner to include multilingual learners’ self-perception of their cultural identities and positionings, both in terms of their current situation and the futures they imagine for themselves and the role English may play in this desired future. Conceptualising learners as multilingual subjects who are negotiating multiple identities in a globalised workplace has implications for ESP teachers and curricula, and certainly has the potential to move the field forward from the deficit views that tended to characterise the early years of ESP. Studies that adopt more critical perspectives such as those referred to above can only be welcomed as they challenge the perception of ESP as accommodationist (Starfield, 2013b).

As Belcher (2004) points out, there is much we still need to understand about the nature of expertise in the professions and in workplaces. Researchers should be encouraged to leave the academy and venture into the workplace so that innovative studies that draw on multiple methods become more frequent, such as, for example, Handford and Matous’ (2011) study of spoken discourse at a Hong Kong construction site, which combines ethnographic observation with corpus examination of the discourse in use, and Gimenez’s (2014) ethnographically-oriented study of the multi-communication practices in four contemporary multinational corporations. The affordances of technology have the potential to be of great pedagogic benefit, significantly increasing the ability of ESP researchers and practitioners to more fully account for workplace interaction, allowing us to “capture gesture, body movement and gaze in interaction” (Marra, 2013: 187). Marra and colleagues have pioneered methodologies that involve research subjects as active participants in the research process. In their studies of white collar workplaces in New Zealand, authentic data is often collected by the participants themselves who, after appropriate negotiation and trust building, take responsibility for “recording their own interactions based on negotiated research goals” (Marra, 2013: 177). As Swales (1985b: 221) noted, “ESP is required to operate within the multifarious universe of discourse denizensed by other occupations, disciplines and professions”. The challenge facing practitioners and researchers remains that of entering these worlds, understanding their meaning-making practices and assisting newcomers to successfully participate in these discursive worlds.

Many ESP researchers are also practitioners, and there are many ESP practitioners who do not themselves publish research but would be interested in learning more about courses and programme development in different contexts. Thus, it would be useful to have a range of fora for the dissemination of analyses of courses and programmes which, as indicated above, have largely disappeared from reputable academic journals as not being seen to be ‘research-worthy’. The affordances of the digital world could be usefully harnessed for these purposes. The predominance of peer-reviewed SSCI-indexed journals that publish ESP research being mainly located in Centre countries is also an issue that requires addressing. The emergence in a diversity of locations of an increasing number of journals devoted to ESP testifies, however, to both the international nature.
of the field and its adaptive endurance, with ESP associations in countries such as Taiwan, Serbia and France, to list but a few, producing their own academic journals.

**Summary**

This chapter has reviewed key issues in the field of English for specific purposes. After providing a historical overview, it traced current key issues, including the centrality of needs analysis, the relationship between content and language in ESP, and debates surrounding the level of subject knowledge ESP practitioners require, and outlined some of the ideological questions surrounding ESP in the world. In the rapidly changing contemporary world, ESP faces a number of challenges, which necessitates both continued research and sharing of good practice in this dynamic field.

**Discussion questions**

- How would you go about developing an ESP course in an area for which you have very little content or contextual knowledge?
- How would you go about finding out about the specific needs of the learners on your course?
- To what extent do you think the ESP teacher should consider the learners’ ‘rights’ as well as their needs?
- To what extent do you think an ESP teacher needs to be a specialist in the content area?

**Related topics**

Corpora in ELT; English for academic purposes; Politics, power relationships and ELT; World Englishes and English as a Lingua Franca.

**Further reading**


**References**


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