English for Specific Purposes: Research Trends, Issues and Controversies

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Abstract

The domain of English for Specific Purposes (ESP) has had a strong research tradition since its inception in the 1960s. The present paper deals with the current research concerns of ESP in order to find out in which direction the field is moving. The information is gleaned primarily from the pages of the flagship journal of the field, English for Specific Purposes. Apart from this online Asian ESP Journal has been referred to trace the research tradition in Asia, especially in India. The present paper surveys data-based studies as well as descriptions of ESP programmes and environments. It then examines current issues that concern the field and concludes with an investigation of how far ESP programmes work in the Asian contexts.

Introduction : The concept of ESP

English for Specific Purposes (ESP) is as a branch of English language Teaching (ELT) and refereed as 'applied ELT' as the aims and contents of any ESP course is based on specific needs of the learners. Unlike ESP, English for General Purposes (EGP), where courses are designed based on general needs of the learners. Although in designing courses for both ESP and EGP learners, needs analysis has been a primary focus, both differ in the approach of needs analysis. While ESP courses focus more on specific and immediate needs of the learners, EGP courses may not focus on specific needs of the learners as learners at that stage may not be able to specify their contexts of using language.

Origins of ESP

There are many reasons which might have led to the origin and development of ESP. Notably, there are three reasons common to the emergence of all ESP programme: the demand of a Brave New World, a revolution in linguistics and focus on the learners (Hutchinson and Waters, 1987).

The general effect of all this development was to exert pressure on the language teaching profession to deliver the required goods. Whereas English had previously decided its own destiny, it now became subject to the wishes, needs and demands of people other than language teachers (Hutchinson and Waters, 1907, p.7).

The second reason of the origin of ESP is due to a revolution in linguistics. Unlike traditional linguists describe the features of language, revolutionary pioneers in linguistics focus more on the way language is used for the purpose of communication. The study of language focuses more on 'use' of language than its 'usage'. Hutchinson and Waters (1987) focus on the difference between written and spoken language. It is proved that the use of language will vary according to the context. Thus, there is a need to tailor language courses as language use varies from context to context. Depending on the context, the use of language will vary, which demands a different type of language teaching for that specific context. Thus in the 1960s and 1970s many attempts were made to develop language courses for science and technology students, described as English for Science and Technology (EST). According to Hutchinson and Waters (1987), Ever and Lattorre, Swales, Selinker and Trimble are some of the proponents of EST programmes.

The final reason Hutchinson and Waters (1987) cite for the emergence of ESP is the development of Educational psychology, which focuses on the learners and their attitudes to

learning. Hutchinson and Waters (1987) state "Learners were seen to have different needs and interests, which would have an important influence on their motivation to learn and therefore on the effectiveness of their learning. This lent support to the development of courses in which 'relevance' to the learner's needs and interests was paramount". (p. 8).

Language-centred and learning-centred approaches to course design are the outcome of the final reason of origin of ESP, which believe in the principle that learning is totally determined by the learners.

Research Domains in ESP

ESP comprises the largest representative of an international movement known as Language for Specific Purposes (LSP). As has been referred by Master (2005). The current concerns of the LSP movement are exemplified by a recent call of papers for an international conference on the subject. It includes the use of networks (especially the internet) and multimedia in LSP teaching, E-learning application and experiences, informational technology in educational research, interaction in virtual learning environments, information technology and materials developments; information technology and learners autonomy, lexicography and terminology; translation: and discourse and genre studies (corpus-based studies). The primary difference between ESP and LSP is that where LSP is concerned is translation studies, ESP does not focus its studies in translation.

Thus, research in ESP, happens mostly within the overlapping domains of English Language Education for specific purposes and discourse/genre analysis.

Developments, Trends and Traditions in ESP

In an analysis of research trends in four Western Applied Linguistics (AL) journals between 1985 and 1997, Gao, Li and Lu (2001) found that there has been a shift in AL to qualitative methods from quantitative approach. According to Master (2005) in TESOL quarterly, the qualitative research over the last 12 years are based on the following percentage:

1) Ethnography – 32%
2) Verbal reports – 25%
3) Text analysis – 22%
4) Narrative Accounts – 17%
5) Classroom Interaction Analysis 3%

From the above data it is clearly observed that there has been a great demand of ethnographic study in ESP.

Hewings (2002) provides an overview of ESP research published by Elsevier in the following table:

Topic of Papers (Hewings, 2002)

Topic	Vol. 1 – 5 1980 - 1986	Vol. 6 – 10 1987 - 1991	Vol. 11 – 15 1992 - 1996	Vol. 16 – 20 1997 – 2001
Text/discourse analysis	34	33	51	49
Program description	36	11	14	10
Needs Analysis/Syllabus design	11	12	6	9
Materials/methods	5	8	9	6
Argument/discussion	0	12	4	8
Testing	2	3	4	6
Teacher Training	5	1	1	3
Other	7	7	10	9

From the above table it is clear that text/discourse analysis has dominated since its inception and continues to the present day also. On the other hand programme description had a great demand in the year 1980 – 1986, but started diminishing later on.

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Needs analysis and syllabus design are the third preferred research area in the ESP world. Although, its demand has been decreasing years after years, still it is the roof of any ESP programme. On the other hand, materials and methods have captured researchers' attention and their demands have been increasing.

English for Specific Purposes: an International Research Journal provides a detailed account of researches carried out in the field of ESP. If we analyse research articles published during 2000 to 2010 we can still find how discourse analysis, programme description, needs analysis/ syllabus design and materials and methods are some major areas of research. Some of the articles published in ESP Journal from 2000 to 2010 are as followings:

- Gilberto's *Technothrillers and English for science and technology (ESPJ, vol19, 2000)*

- *Florence's An analysis of English in workplace : the communication needs of textile and clothing merchandisers (ESPJ, vol.19, 2000)*

- Parkinson's *Acquiring scientific literacy through content and genre: a theme-based language course for science students (ESPJ, vol19, 2000)*

- Bosher and Smalkoski's *From needs analysis to curriculum development : designing a course in health-care communication for immigrant students in the USA* (ESPJ, vol.21, 2009)

- Candlin's Developing legal writing materials for English second language learners: problems and perspectives (ESPJ, vol.21, 2002)

- Holme and Chalauisaeng's The learner as needs analyst : the use of participatory appraisal in the EAP reading classroom (ESPJ, vol.25, 2006)

There has also been a trend of doing research using technology i.e. multimedia and using web sources. Some of the examples are;

- Paul Brett's *Integrating multimedia into the Business English Curriculum: a case study (ESPJ, vol19, 2000)*

- Julio C. Gimenez's *Business e-mail communication: some emerging tendencies in register* (ESPJ, vol.19, 2000)

- Stapleton and helms-Park 's *Evaluating Web sources in an EAP course: Introducing a multi-trait instrument for feedback and assessment (ESPJ, vol.25, 2006)*

Further, Master (2005) quotes Hewings (2002) while discussing the ESP sub area represented by articles published in English for Specific Purposes. He states "over the 20 year history of the journal English for Science and Technology (EST) and English for Academic Purposes (EAP) have dominated and continue to dominate, whereas articles concerned with General ESP have fallen from 20% in the early years of the journals to less than 5% in recent years" (p – 101). Further he states that English for Occupational/Professional Purposes (EOP/EPP) shares 10% and research in Business English has increased dramatically.

Further, regarding the nature of research Hewings talks about two areas: more of communication and concern with professional versus student products. Mode of communication implies whether the data analysed are written or spoken. According to Master (2005) between 1997 and 2001, analyses of written text comprised 86% of this category and 14% for spoken. In the early 1980s, the ratio was 73% written to 27% spoken. It shows that the research in spoken discourse has been increasing.

An international character is one of the major strengths of ESP research. Master (2005) provides a statistical analysis where he mentions that in the period 1997 to 2001, international authors accounted 69% of the articles. This shows how ESP research is

internationally popular. The increasing specificity is a primary characteristic of ESP research today. Hewings believes "The growing use of English as the means of communication in interaction between non-native English speakers seems likely to have a major impact on the kinds of ESP programmes we provide and the type of research needs to underpin those programmes" (Hewings, 2002). Further, Dudley – Evans and St. John (1997) emphasise the issue of cross-cultural in ESP research when they state "what language is culturally appropriate in different situations" (p. 232).

ESP Research in India

ESP research in India focuses more in designing special courses and teaching materials. Apart from this programme description and discourse analysis are two major trends in ESP research in India. There are a few researches based on EOP (English for Occupational Purposes). Teacher training is the least preferred area in India as in the whole world. Some of the unpublished dissertations from English and Foreign Languages University (EFLU), Hyderabad provide a broad view of ESP researches in India.

The followings are some examples of ESP research from EFL University, Hyderabad before 2000.

- A selection of Reading Materials for Students of Science and Technology (Indira, 1972)

- Analysis of the Register of Defence technical Institutes as a Basis for English Proficiency Test Construction (Mukerji, 1976)

- The Teaching of English in Indian Institute of Technology (Rama Rao, 1976)

- Designing a Special purpose course in English for the Students of Law in Rajasthan (Bhatia, 1977)

- English for Business : An Analysis Designing a Special Purpose Course for Students of Commerce (Usha, 1978)

- The Language of law : some Distinctive Features (Srinivasan, 1987)

The list of theses after 2000 (From EFLU Library, Hyderabad)

- A Framework for EST Course Design with Special Reference to Engineering Students of Andra Pradesh (Srilalitha, 2003)

- The Suitability of the Textbook in Engineering Colleges for Developing Communicative Skills : A Study (Indira, 2003)

- Curriculum Reappraisal Issues in Business Communication Spoken Skills Course : A Case Study (Lanka, 2005)

- Redefining Issues in Syllabus and Materials Design: An Analytical Study of the First Year JNTU English Course (Neelaveni, 2005)

- Envisioning Language for Technical Workforce : An ITI based Study (Victor, 2007)

- Exploring the Training Needs of English Teachers in Engineering Colleges (Mohapatra, 2010)

There is a slight difference in research before and after 2000 in the context of India. Before 2000 there were many researches on program description and discourse analysis, but after 2000 much attention was paid to materials evaluation, teacher training and curriculum appraisal.

Some current controversies in ESP research

According to Master (2005), current controversies in the field of ESP include the extent of subject knowledge the ESP practitioners need to have, the value of genre-based instruction, and accommodation in EAP.

1. Subject matter knowledge

How much subject-matter expertise the ESP practitioner must possess? This has been a controversy since the early days of ESP. Responding to this issue many researchers have their own opinions. According to Taylor (1994) the critical factors for the ESP teacher are attitude and interest, not content knowledge. As students generally have the content knowledge, teachers can exploit that. Troike (1994), on the other hand, expressed "it is far easier, and more efficient, to train subject – matter specialists in the basics of ESL than to try to train ESL teachers in the technical content of the ESP subject", and "if we try, or even pretend, to teach ESP without knowing the subject matter, we are seriously fooling ourselves or short changing our students, or both". (p. 7)

The above two contrast views can be solved through team teaching (Johns and Dudley – Evans, 1991), where there is the presence of both content teacher and language instructors. This area still needs some more exploration to see how far this is practically feasible in the growing demand of quality teacher-training programmes.

2. The Value of Genre-Based Instruction

After the publication of Genre Analysis by John Swales in 1990, much attention was shifted to the notion of genre in the field of ESP research. The issue was whether genre specification should be taught. It is the understanding of the social context than the specification of genre, according to Freedman & Medway (1994). However Halliday (1978) emphasises that language form is shaped by social context. There is still research going on to find out whether genre teaching is ultimately a scaffold or a strait jacket.

3. The Efficacy of ESP

ESP still lacks research more on quantitative studies, i.e. experimental or quasi experimental. Mackay (1981) stated that the euphoria of the innovative phase in ESP programmes has died down (p.108), leaving the field open to several questions of accountability, such as:

- Do these ESP/EST programs work?

- Are they more effective than previous programs aimed at general language proficiency?

- If so, in what ways are they more effective?

- Are there any ways in which they are less effective?

- Can the expense be justified?

- Should we spend money on continuous quality control of ESP courses?

- Is there any evidence that syllabus planners are performing at least as well now, in terms of serving their clients' needs, as they were prior to the ESP epoch?

- Are there any unintended or unforeseen outcomes resulting from the use of any given ESP program? (cited in Master (2005)).

Duff (2001) cites Jordan (1997) and Zamel and Spack (1998) stating the insufficient research in 'language learning, discourse socialisation and assessment at more advanced levels.....for academic or occupational purposes' (p. 606). She cites four major research questions to address what she finds to be lacking. They are:

- What kinds of preparation, intervention, and assessment are most effective in assisting ESL learners in these [i.e., ESP] settings to attain their own goals as well as reach established external standards?

- What factors contribute to underachievement or attrition among particular Ethnolinguistic groups of L2 students in academic/occupational programs, and what interventions might improve completion rates and other desired outcomes for these groups?

- What is the impact of ESL program completion on participants' language abilities and identities within their academic and professional communities?

Dudley-Evans (2001), in his farewell editorial, notes how focused and specific ESP work has become.

> The specificity I have noted is not necessarily of a subject-specific nature; it is rather that, as ESP research becomes more sophisticated and the range of its activity much broader, it has inevitably developed a much more focussed approach that looks at more detailed questions. (p.311) [A]lready in 10(1) [1991] the trend in *English for Specific Purposes* towards articles presenting analysis rather than pedagogical issues and syllabus design was apparent.....while not in any way rejecting the need for theory and analysis in ESP, I do feel that we are reaching a stage where we need to consider how effective the courses that are developed from this research are. Are we really delivering in the ESP classroom? Are students in ESP classes more motivated than those in General English classes? I look forward to reading some more papers on these topics in future issues." (p.312)

Conclusion

This paper highlights the concept, origin and development of ESP in the beginning and later on focuses on research domain in ESP, highlighting ESP research in India. Apart from this, a

brief attempt has also been made to find out some controversies in ESP teaching and reserach. As research is a never ending process, ESP research has a long way to go.

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