

# Introduction

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## Overview of the Handbook

The *Handbook of English for Specific Purposes* is a state of the art survey of research in the field of English for specific purposes (ESP). Each chapter of the book presents a review of a particular topic in English for specific purposes research. The chapters have been specially written for the *Handbook* by authors who have a high level of expertise and are well regarded in the field of English for specific purposes research. Each chapter includes comprehensive reviews of research in the area being discussed, as well as indications for further research directions in relation to the particular topic.

The audience for the *Handbook* is students, teachers, and researchers with an interest in English for specific purposes research, as well as people working in the areas of language studies, language teaching, and applied linguistics more generally. The *Handbook* is aimed at upper level undergraduate students as well as graduate students undertaking masters and doctoral degrees in TESOL, English language teaching, and applied linguistics. The book is also a reference work for scholars with an interest in researching this particular area of language teaching and learning. The book does not assume a background in the area of English for specific purposes, but is, at the same time, sufficiently advanced to meet the needs of researchers in this area. The *Handbook* aims to be a user-friendly yet authoritative reference work for students and researchers in the area of English for specific purposes.

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*The Handbook of English for Specific Purposes*, First Edition.

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## What is English for Specific Purposes?

English for specific purposes (ESP) refers to the teaching and learning of English as a second or foreign language where the goal of the learners is to use English in a particular domain. The teaching of English for specific purposes, in its early days, was largely motivated by the need to communicate across languages in areas such as commerce and technology (see Benesch 2001, Johns, this volume, Starfield 2012 for reviews of these developments). This has now expanded to include other areas such as English for academic purposes (EAP), English for occupational purposes (EOP), English for vocational purposes (EVP), English for medical purposes (EMP), English for business purposes (EBP), English for legal purposes (ELP), and English for sociocultural purposes (ESCP) (Belcher 2009).

A key feature of an ESP course is that the content and aims of the course are oriented to the specific needs of the learners. ESP courses, then, focus on the language, skills, and genres appropriate to the specific activities the learners need to carry out in English. Typically (although not always) ESP students are adult learners. They are also often a homogeneous group in terms of learning goals, although not always in terms of language proficiency. Key issues in the teaching of English for specific purposes are how to identify learner needs, the nature of the genres that learners need to be able to produce as well as participate in, and how we can know that our learners have been able to do this successfully, and, if not, what we can do to help them to do this. These (and many other) issues are discussed in this *Handbook*.

## Research Directions in English for Specific Purposes

In a chapter (Paltridge and Starfield 2011) we wrote for the *Handbook of Research in Second Language Teaching and Learning* we looked at current research trends in English for specific purposes as they appeared in the pages of the journal *English for Specific Purposes*. The main themes we identified were studies that took a genre perspective on ESP language use, corpus studies of specific purposes uses of English, studies which examined the use of English as a lingua franca in specific purpose settings, and research into advanced academic literacies. We also found that studies that looked at issues of identity in ESP teaching and learning and ethnographic approaches to examining ESP texts and contexts were increasing in their popularity.

Belcher et al.'s (2011) *New Directions in English for Specific Purposes Research* takes this discussion further by pointing to other issues that are attracting the interest of ESP researchers. One of these is the issue of disciplinary language and ESP teaching. Hyland (2002, 2004, 2011) in the area of EAP, for example, has shown how the use of language varies in terms of rhetorical patterns and linguistic features across disciplines, especially in their written genres, arguing that this needs

to be accounted for in the teaching and researching of specific purpose genres. ESP studies have also considered contextual aspects of specific purpose genres, taking up Swales' (1993) argument for the need to go beyond structural and linguistic examinations of texts in order to better understand social and contextual features of genres (see Paltridge and Wang 2011; Swales and Rogers 1995 for further discussion of this). Research in ESP, then, has increasingly moved from linguistic descriptions, on their own, to studies which aim to understand why genres are shaped as they are, and how they achieve their particular goals.

Classroom-based research has also come to more prominence in ESP publications. A key researcher in this area is Cheng (2011) who discusses learner, teacher, and institutional factors that impact on ESP teaching and learning. He points to the need to better understand how learner needs and expectations are translated into learning objectives in ESP classes, as well as how ESP students interpret these objectives and use them to guide their own learning. Cheng also discusses the relationship between input materials and output activities and the criteria that ESP teachers use to judge whether their input materials are suitable for their students and the learning objectives of the course. He discusses the issue of appropriate methodologies in ESP classes as well as classroom-based assessment in ESP settings. Cheng's research helps us to understand some of these questions. There are still, however, many questions in this area that need future research.

Identity continues to be a research interest in the area of ESP as well as the use of English as a lingua franca in specific purpose settings. Genre studies continue to attract interest, although they are now becoming increasingly more complex and multi-method than they once were (see Flowerdew 2011, Tardy 2011 for further discussion of this). There is an ever-increasing use of ethnographic techniques in ESP research (see Dressen-Hammouda, this volume; Starfield 2011) and the issue of learner needs is becoming more complex and more focused, not just on what learners need to do, but also on who they want to become (Belcher and Lukkarila 2011). Corpus studies have continued to have an important place in ESP research and critical discourse analysis, as well as critical perspectives more generally, which have started to gain more prominence in ESP research (see e.g. Kandil and Belcher 2011; Starfield 2011, this volume). Research in ESP, then, while still specific, is also increasingly critical and ethnographic at the same time as it maintains its materials-driven, learner-centered and needs-responsive focus (Belcher 2009; Dudley-Evans and St. John 1998). As Johns in the first chapter of this volume points out, ESP research has come a long way since its early days in the 1960s. It has perhaps moved in ways that early teachers and researchers might not have expected, or anticipated. Some of these developments are reflected in the chapters of this *Handbook*.

There are most certainly, however, other developments that are yet to come, as very clearly articulated by Diane Belcher in the final chapter of the *Handbook*. In her chapter, Belcher points to the important role that ESP can play in increasing access and options for learners in their current and future worlds of work, study, and everyday life. In particular, she points to how research into specific purpose language use as well as ESP professional practice more generally, can help do this.

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