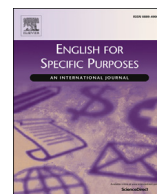


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Methods reported in ESP research articles: A comparative survey of two leading journals



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ABSTRACT

Research articles published between 2003 and 2012 in *English for Specific Purposes* were surveyed and compared with those in the *Journal of English for Academic Purposes* over the same timeframe. The aim was to discover the research methods most commonly used and the research paradigms underrepresented in the field. In both journals the research methods were overwhelmingly qualitative, with an emphasis on analysis of written discourse (particularly corpus-based). These results contrast with earlier studies in the field of applied linguistics and ESOL, where a preference for publishing quantitative research was noted. There was very little purely quantitative research in the two journals of the current inquiry, apart from corpus-based studies, but a growing interest in qualitative/quantitative and mixed methods was noted. This research and discussion note argues for greater variety in research methods in ESP, and more balance between quantitative and qualitative research in the journals.

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1. Introduction

Research has always played an important role in ESP, and the quality and quantity of empirical research in the field continues to grow (Belcher, 2006; Hewings, 2002). Traditionally, ESP research has drawn on approaches and methods in applied linguistics, but sociology, psychology, learning theory, and rhetoric have also been influential (Hewings, 2002). As ESP is interdisciplinary, researchers seeking to have their work published have a wide range of generalist and specialist journals from which to choose. Arguably, however, the specialist international peer-reviewed journals with the greatest relevance, highest readership, and strongest impact on ESP practitioners are *English for Specific Purposes (ESPj)*, established in 1980, and the *Journal of English for Academic Purposes (JEAP)*, set up in 2002. This research note aims to inform scholars in the ESP field of the kinds of research methods that have been published in these flagship journals over the first decade in which have both existed and to suggest promising approaches to research that may be underrepresented.

Surveys of research published in the field of ESP have appeared periodically in the last decade or so, but none have focused primarily on research methods. Hewings (2002) overviewed articles published in *ESPj* during the two decades 1980–2001. However, this survey was more concerned with the range of research topics accepted for publication than the research methods used. While Hewings did not specifically compare the frequency of different approaches, he noted that text and discourse analysis had increased steadily throughout the period. He suggested that this trend was related in part to “the growing realization that to provide convincing and effective ESP courses or materials, we need to know a considerable

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amount about target situations” (p. 6). He went on to explain that “for example, in order to teach business negotiation we need to examine what happens in authentic negotiation ... or if we are helping students to write theses, we need to be able to identify the valued characteristics of theses in particular disciplines.” He noted that the development of more sophisticated analytical tools, such as genre and corpus analysis, have been particularly helpful for this purpose. More recently, *ESPj* editors Paltridge and Starfield (2011) discussed the predominant research interests in ESP; they cited examples, mostly from *ESPj*, of discourse/text analysis via genre and/or corpus-based studies, and ethnographic approaches, but they did not make an empirical study of these and other methods that had been used over time. They concluded with a call for more contextualized, ethnographically based accounts of genres in ESP, based on multiple data sources, suggesting an even deeper focus on qualitative methods in the journal. Belcher, Johns, and Paltridge (2011) offered additional support for the qualitative agenda in an edited collection with specific chapters that highlight qualitative methods of genre analysis, critical ethnography, and corpus analysis. On the other hand, Master (2005) called for more robust empirical research using quantitative methods that might demonstrate the efficacy of ESP courses. In his study of 57 *ESPj* articles from 2000 to 2002 he found some simple descriptive statistics involving percentages, means, and standard deviations, but no “experimental or quasi-experimental designs supported by inferential statistics” (p. 109) that might provide a more rigorous basis for curriculum and materials, pedagogy, assessment, and evaluation.

Although the previously mentioned literature suggests that there may be a qualitative bias in the field of ESP research, there have been no surveys that have systematically analyzed the range and frequency of particular methods in the research articles published. The nearest comparable studies were conducted in applied linguistics and ESOL, and interestingly, all were motivated by concern at a lack of qualitative research in those fields. For example, Lazaraton (2000) investigated 332 research articles published between 1991 and 1997 in *Language Learning*, *The Modern Language Journal*, *Studies in Second Language Acquisition*, and *TESOL Quarterly*. She found a high preference for quantitative research in all the journals, although *TESOL Quarterly* was slightly more favorable to qualitative researchers, with 38% of the research approaches in that period reported as non-quantitative. Gao, Li, and Lü (2001) compared research trends in *Applied Linguistics*, *TESOL Quarterly*, *The Modern Language Journal*, and the *International Review of Applied Linguistics*, and found that over the period 1985–1997, there was a steady rise in qualitative studies. *TESOL Quarterly* showed the biggest change, with qualitative (47%) finally overtaking quantitative (32%) in 1997. A more recent study (Benson, Chik, Gao, Huang, & Wang, 2009) of ten major international language-teaching and learning journals in English (but not *ESPj* or *JEAP*) from 1997 to 2006 found that quantitative research still dominates. Only 22% of the published research used qualitative methods, although there was considerable variation among journals, the lowest being *Studies in Second Language Acquisition* with 5% and the highest *TESOL Quarterly* with 43%.

2. Research questions and methods

In contrast to the survey results noted above, a cursory glance at *ESPj* and *JEAP* tables of contents suggests that qualitative research dominates these two publications, and that despite Master’s suggestion that quantitative studies are lacking in the field of ESP, there has been increased focus on qualitative rather than quantitative studies. In an attempt to arrive at some empirical data about the current state of play, the following questions were posed:

1. What research methods have been reported in empirical research articles published in *ESPj*, and how does that journal compare with *JEAP*?
2. What is the frequency and distribution of these research methods over time?
3. What appropriate research methods have been underrepresented in these two journals during this period?

2.1. Problems in categorizing research methods

At this point it is necessary to provide some explanations and definitions of the terms used in this paper. This is not a simple matter; in the vast and diverse literature about research, there is no consensus about the meaning of commonly used terms such as ‘method’ and ‘approach.’ The choice of terminology can be deeply interwoven with the writer’s own epistemology and research agenda. For example, Lillis (2008), in writing about ethnography in academic writing research, differentiates among ‘method,’ ‘methodology,’ and ‘deep theorizing.’ For Lillis, ‘method’ is a type of data collection, for example interview, observation, or case study, whereas ‘methodology’ incorporates the full suite of methods used; it subsumes method and addresses the larger context. At a higher level of abstraction, there is ‘deep theorizing,’ which brings data and context together. An important principle for her is that a particular kind of research operates simultaneously on several levels and that it is important to fully understand what each of these levels entails theoretically and practically.

While I accept the finer distinctions outlined above, the primary focus in this paper is on the methods of data collection, analysis, and interpretation that were used, rather than the overarching theory, methodology, or approach. One of the first tasks in conducting my research was to categorize research methods. Gao et al. (2001) simply categorized research articles into empirical and non-empirical, and then subdivided empirical into qualitative and quantitative. They defined empirical studies as those “characterized by systematic collection and analysis of data” (p. 3). Studies that were not data-driven, focused for example on theory and implication, pedagogical operations, personal experience, and views, were discounted as non-empirical. For a definition of quantitative research the authors relied on Henning’s (1986) criteria: data quantification,

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