

Original Paper

A Review of Researches on English for Specific Purposes and the Implications for Its Development in China

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Abstract

This paper provides a comprehensive review of English for Specific Purposes research, comparing the characteristics and trends of both international and Chinese studies. Drawing on a selection of papers from English for Specific Journal, the internationally leading ESP journal, and Chinese Social Sciences Citation Index (CSSCI) publications, the analysis reveals several key findings. Internationally, ESP research is characterized by a focus on the use of English as a lingua franca, the development and application of English for Academic Purposes (EAP), and English for Occupational Purposes (EOP). Studies delve into the complexities of language use across diverse fields, examining the impact of cultural differences, communication challenges, and the evolving nature of ESP teaching and learning. In China, ESP research has evolved to emphasize the need for localized approaches tailored to the country’s specific educational context. There is a clearer orientation in EAP and EOP related studies, and a rapid development of studies on classroom teaching. Research in China also highlights the role of information technology in transforming ESP teaching, with a growing emphasis on the integration of digital tools and platforms. The paper identifies several implications for ESP research in China. Firstly, there is a need for greater investment in research, both in terms of quantity and quality, to address the increasing demand for ESP expertise. Secondly, Chinese scholars should continue to explore teaching

and research models that are contextually relevant, particularly in the context of the “Belt and Road” initiative. Thirdly, greater engagement with the international academic community is crucial for promoting Chinese perspectives and contributing to global ESP discourse. Finally, research methods should be enhanced, with a greater emphasis on empirical studies and the use of quantitative and qualitative approaches.

Keywords

Review, English for Specific Purposes, China

1. Introduction

In the era of globalization, English has emerged as a lingua franca, playing a pivotal role in various domains such as business, science, technology, and education. This has given rise to the field of English for Specific Purposes (ESP), which tailors language instruction to meet the specific needs of learners in different professional and academic contexts.

Originating in the 1960s in Western countries, ESP has gradually developed into an emerging discipline. So far, the development of ESP has gone through six stages: register analysis, discourse/rhetorical analysis, situational goal analysis, skill analysis, learner-centered approaches, and genre research and is now mature with distinct research areas (Paltridge & Starfield, 2013). ESP entered the English education field in China relatively late and only began to receive attention in the late 1970s; Afterwards, it was once popular domestically. However, due to unclear positioning of ESP, doubts and misunderstandings about ESP teaching and research, as well as insufficient follow-up of teaching staff, its popularity waned in the 1990s. After entering the 21st century, with the continuous expansion of ESP demand and its importance gradually recognized in the education and academic circles, ESP research in China has begun to show diversified development, and the research fields have become more abundant and in-depth. Some scholars in China have introduced and summarized the research on ESP, but most of them focused on domestic research and did not make comparisons between domestic and foreign researches. In order to reveal the recent developments in this field of research, highlight the characteristics of ESP research in China, and identify its shortcomings, this article examines the publication of ESP research papers. By reviewing research papers on the theme of “ESP” published in recent years, this article analyzes the hotspots and topics of ESP research at home and abroad, compares the similarities and differences between domestic and foreign research, and hopes to help Chinese researchers better grasp research trends and directions. The journals referred to include the international ESP research professional journal *English for Specific Purpose* and eight key relevant Chinese journals in the list of Chinese Social Sciences Citation Index (CSSCI), a database used to retrieve the collection of papers and citations of literature in the field of Chinese social sciences, and a landmark project in the evaluation field of humanities and social sciences in China.

2. Characteristics of ESP Research Internationally

With a collection of 260 research papers published in *English for Specific Purpose*, it was found that ESP related research internationally in recent years has particularly focused on the use of English as a lingua franca, the development status of ESP, English for Academic Purposes (EAP), English for Occupational purposes (EOP), and highlighted the importance of needs and communication in the teaching process.

Firstly, there is a focus on the study of the use of English as a lingua franca. The overall development of ESP has reached a mature stage, and the importance of ESP research is widely accepted. In recent years, research on ESP mainly focuses on a more detailed examination of the characteristics and influences of English as a lingua franca in different countries, fields, occasions, and disciplines. For instance, Kwan and Dunworth (2016) examined the use of English by Filipino and Hong Kong employees in the workplace, distinguishing between positive and negative pragmatic strategies, highlighting the importance of pragmatic competence, and emphasizing the necessity of reflecting on the current state of ESP teaching. Camiciottoli (2020) used as data the financial information of large Italian and Japanese companies in the field of international investment to investigate their preferred communication styles in investment relations communication. The results showed that the former highlighted social relationships while the latter emphasized the normative aspects of financial communication, reflecting distinct cultural differences. Based on this, relevant suggestions for ESP teaching were proposed. Scholars have also studied the challenges and opportunities faced by ESP (e.g., Kim et al., 2018). Their research showed that although the concept and practices of ESP were generally mature, there was still a need for enhancing people's understanding of ESP and the implementation conditions of ESP projects in some countries and regions (such as South Korea, Brazil, China, etc.).

Secondly, research on English for Academic Purposes has become a focal point (accounting for 31%). Hutchinson and Waters (1987, p. 30) divided ESP into English for Academic Purposes (EAP) and English for Professional Purposes (EOP). Researches relating to EAP in recent years covered a wide range of academic texts, including published academic papers, doctoral and master's theses, book reviews, academic seminars, manuscript reviews, project proposals, and textbooks. The scope of study has become increasingly comprehensive and detailed, encompassing the diversity of text organization, research methods, critical expressions in literature reviews, cross-cultural or cross-register comparisons of introductions, conclusions, etc. (Cheng, 2012; Bruce, 2014; Kanoksilapatham, 2015; Geng & Wharton, 2019; Chien & Li, 2024). In the mean time, it is recognized that the dominant position of English in international publishing can indeed lead to some inequalities for researchers who write in English as a second language, making it a hot issue for scholars from many countries to study how to improve one's academic writing skills in order to gain more equal opportunities for international academic publications. For instance, Monteiro and Hirano (2020) analyzed the marginalization phenomenon in the internationalization process of academic publishing, and believed that there were not only semi marginalized countries, but also marginalized academic fields. Among them, publications

in the fields of humanities and social sciences were at a clear disadvantage, with education, language, and literature being the particularly advantaged subjects. EAP research also included issues of oral communication, mainly focusing on the specific use of English in international conference paper presentations and discussion sessions (such as Fernandez Polo, 2014). In addition, EAP research is no longer limited to text analysis. Scholars have begun to focus on the study of writing processes, cognitive characteristics, identity construction, influencing factors (Xu, 2013), authors' self identity construction (Zareva, 2013; Işık-Taş, 2018) and the analysis of teachers discourse for classroom identity construction (Tao & Gao, 2018).

Thirdly, EOP researches display a high level of breadth and depth. On the one hand, EOP studies extensively examines the use of language in various fields such as business, finance, law, medicine, aviation, and technology (e.g., Koester, 2014; Spence & Liu, 2013; Pryor & Woodward, 2014, et al.). On the other hand, the use of various analytical methods, mainly including needs analysis, genre analysis, discourse analysis, rhetoric, etc., to examine the specific use of English not only delves into the functions of language, but also fully embodies the interdisciplinary nature of ESP in the studies of EOP. Koester (2014), for example, examined hypothetical indirect speech (HRS), which often appears in negotiations, and believed that HRS first has a persuasive function and can establish close interpersonal relationships in negotiations, thereby better achieving negotiation goals; Spence and Liu (2013) found that process integration engineers need to deal with a large number of communication situations mediated by the use of English, including both reading and writing forms such as emails, work reports, and memos, as well as regular meetings, conference calls, and business presentations. And these demands were constantly growing with the development of global high-tech and the increasingly fierce competition; Pryor and Woodward (2014) carried out genre analysis to examine the workplace setting of doctors' oral communication during telephone consultations, identified and analyzed the genre structure of effective communication. They believed that this effective communication lies in doctors' initiative in communication which can increase patients sense of security and comfort.

Fourthly, ESP classroom research is given due importance, mainly involving curriculum design, classroom actions and teaching methods, etc.. Researches on curriculum design focuses on issues such as the content, the implementation and the evaluation of curriculum, and topics relating to talent cultivation, highlighting the importance of needs analysis of learners. It was proposed that ESP curriculum should focus on the needs of language users and use corpus in the process of evaluation and analysis (Staples, 2019; Smith, etc., 2022). Flowerdew (2010), in particular demonstrated through case analysis that the design and implementation of business courses should be based on the analysis of the current situation and target scenario analysis when it comes to needs analysis. Many scholars also studied the selection, composition and evaluation of textbooks, emphasizing the need to combine teaching with research and practical application. As Sznajder (2010) claimed, although many scholars believe that metaphors should be included in the ESP curriculum and acknowledge that metaphors can

pose potential difficulties for successful language learning, it was unclear which metaphors should be included in the teaching content. Through comparative analysis of business English textbooks and business journals, She found that there were only a few metaphorical repetitions in the two sets of data and proposed that the selection of metaphors in teaching plans should consider the examples in the corpus and cater to the actual use of language. Classroom action research mainly focuses on communicative teaching, with some studies emphasizing learner-centeredness, cognitive factors of learners, and collaborative behavior among learners. For instance, Weninger and Kan (2013) discussed and evaluated in detail the practice of integrating the principle of critical language awareness into business communication teaching, and tracked changes in learners' metalinguistic awareness, particularly their recognition that language helps build social relationships. There are also studies on classroom behavior in writing, such as Friginal's (2013) discussion on the use of corpora in the writing process. Furthermore, the research on teaching methods mainly analyzed the characteristics and practical considerations of needs analysis, genre analysis, content analysis, and problem-based teaching methods (Arias-Contreras & Moore, 2022; Outemzabet & Sarnou, 2023 et al.). Among which, many studies explored the importance of analyzing the needs of teachers and students from multiple perspectives such as communication, textbooks, and the workplace in teaching (Chan, 2019; Peters & Fernández, 2013). There was relatively few research on teachers, but it reflected the dilemma faced by EAP teachers, namely the contradiction between professional knowledge and teaching requirements, as well as the lack of EAP teacher training. Atai and Fatahi-Majd (2014) conducted a comparative study on the inter- and intra- group similarities and differences in EAP teaching practice and cognition between Iranian English teachers and professional teachers. They found that professional teachers can greatly benefit from training on applied linguistics theories. However, due to the lack of systematic EAP teacher training programs, English teachers had to rely on their own efforts to keep up with the latest developments in language teaching and EAP teaching.

3. Characteristics of ESP Research in China

Through China National Knowledge Infrastructure (CNKI) (Note 1), the search in eight core foreign language CSSCI journals, including *Journal of Foreign Languages*, *Computer-assisted Foreign Language Education*, *Foreign Language Teaching and Research*, *Journal of the Foreign Language World*, *Foreign Language Research*, *Foreign Languages Research*, *Foreign Languages and Their Teaching*, *Modern Foreign Languages*, resulted in a total of 73 ESP related papers published from 2010 to 2023. As can be seen from Figure 1, the annual publication volume was relatively low and it showed a downward trend since 2016. Considering the ever-increasing demand for talents with international communication skills, ESP has not been given due attention in China.

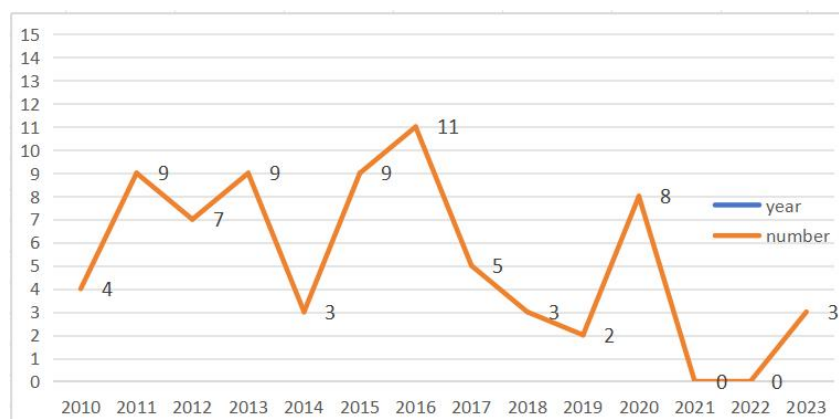


Figure 1. Publications of ESP in CSSCI Journals in China from 2010 to 2023

Further reading of the papers reveals that recent ESP research in China was characterized by the devotion to combine with the nation's specific educational context, clearer orientations, rapid development of studies on classroom teaching, and an emphasis on the role of information technology in ESP teaching.

Firstly, ESP researches are devoted to exploring the development of ESP suitable for China's national conditions. The early research on the rationales and theories of ESP in China mainly reflected in introducing and bringing foreign theories and experiences, discussing the similarities and differences between ESP teaching and general English teaching, the theoretical basis, disciplinary nature, and problems faced by ESP. For example, Wang (2012) reviewed a new book in the field of ESP published by the University of Michigan Press, introduced the key research topics, current research status and trends of ESP, and pointed out the future development direction of this field. Later researches show that Chinese scholars have shifted to comparative analysis and discussion of ESP development patterns that are suitable for China's national conditions. While emphasizing the status and importance of ESP teaching, some scholars such as Cai (2015) pointed out the enormous obstacles and pressures faced by ESP teaching, such as lack of formal recognition from the education department, doubts about its necessity from the leadership of universities, and a considerable number of university English teachers and scholars even did not possess proper knowledge about ESP, and suggested that significant changes were urgently needed in both cognition and practice.

Secondly, there evolved clearer orientations in ESP branches. On the one hand, college English teaching experienced a shift from general English to EAP. For example, Cai (2014) proposed that, given the peculiarities of college English teaching in China, the focus should be EAP, replacing the current college English curriculum, for the reason that the former emphasizes real needs, teaching content, competence, project driven, student-centered, and purpose-oriented, which cannot be achieved by the latter in terms of teaching philosophy and methods. On the other hand, higher vocational education was tailored to meet the needs of the country and society for a large number of application-oriented professionals in production, service, and management, and strive to achieve the

EOP shift in vocational English teaching. Lin (2014), for instance, affirmed the academic status of EOP and believed that it is necessary to conduct researches on business linguistics within the scope of applied linguistics, expand into the construction of the field of business language research as an applied interdisciplinary field, and clarified the research direction, object, and scope of theory and application of business language.

Thirdly, research on practical ESP teaching has gained prominence. The research and development on curriculum design and teaching syllabus in China started later than international counterparts, but it has developed rapidly due to government policy support. The specific studies include fundamental issues in teaching reform, such as what to teach and how to teach (Sun & Li, 2011), and the operational process of new teaching models (Chen, 2013). There is relatively few research on textbooks and teachers, but scholars are deeply aware of the problems existing in current textbook and teacher staff construction, and have tried some tentative explorations both in theory and practice (Wen & Mo, 2013; Cai, 2013). In addition, ESP teaching method is also a hot topic in domestic ESP discussions, with particular emphasis on the effective organization of ESP classroom teaching (such as Chen, 2011; Zhang, 2015; Cai, 2023; Fan, etc., 2023). Most of the research on exploring specific elements and sections of teaching in China is combined with specific professional English teaching, such as Ren and Ding (2012), Liu (2016) and Wu (2014). Ren et al. (2012) explored the basic elements of ESP teaching in the practice of English teaching in both Chinese and Western medicine, including teaching objectives, teaching content, teaching staff, teaching timing, placing and teaching methods, and summarized some basic strategies and principles for non English majors to carry out ESP teaching activities.

Fourthly, there is a full recognition of the important role of information technology, which has brought new changes to traditional college English teaching. Literature analysis shows that recent theoretical explorations of ESP in China are increasingly related to modern information technology and exhibit a trend towards interdisciplinary research. Scholars believe that ESP teaching based on educational information technology is an inevitable trend in the development of foreign language teaching in higher education. In particular, Wang and Chen (2015) reviewed the domestic and international development and research status of information technology within this field, analyzed the advantages and characteristics of ESP teaching, studied the current situation and problems of ESP teaching in Chinese universities, pointed out the trends of university ESP teaching in China under the condition of information technology, and proposed measures to strengthen and improve ESP teaching in Chinese universities. Some scholars are actively exploring interdisciplinary collaboration in ESP teaching, such as Gu (2012) who attempted to analyze the current situation and problems of the teaching ecological environment of ESP in universities from an ecological perspective, and proposed targeted suggestions for improving teaching effectiveness.

4. Implications to ESP Research in China

A comparative examination of the characteristics of ESP research, both domestically and internationally,

underscores the growing scholarly interest in this field. Theoretical explorations have seen consistent refinement, while teaching methodologies have become increasingly standardized and systematic, exhibiting emerging trends such as internationalization and the integration of information technology. Our analysis reveals that while Chinese researchers have effectively assimilated foreign theories and practices, there remains room for improvements in terms of research efforts, content, and methodologies. This underscores the need for further development and refinement within the Chinese ESP research landscape.

First and foremost, it is imperative to elevate the prominence of ESP research within China. As previously discussed, the theoretical underpinnings and pedagogical applications of ESP have matured significantly on the international stage, establishing a standardized and systematic framework that is widely recognized and esteemed. The flourishing development of ESP in countries like the UK and the US can, in part, be attributed to the robust English language proficiency of native speakers and the pressing need for international students to surmount language barriers in their academic pursuits. In contrast, the discourse on ESP within China predominantly centers around its positioning within the educational landscape and the exploration of suitable development pathways. While it is undeniable that a wealth of discussions and studies exist, the paucity of high-quality publications and the observed decline in recent years raise concerns. Moreover, research activities tend to be concentrated among a limited number of authors and institutions. Considering the escalating demand for individuals proficient in ESP, it is imperative for China to bolster its research endeavors in both quantity and quality. Prioritizing the timely acknowledgment of ESP's significance and fostering a synergy between theory and practice are crucial steps towards nurturing a cadre of skilled professionals equipped with the necessary language competencies for success in the global arena.

It's is still very important to continue the efforts in exploring in depth ESP teaching and research patterns that are suitable for China's national conditions. The country's ESP research does not necessarily have to follow the trend or even copy the theories and practices in other countries or regions, but should explore more localized formula based on the actual situations. In particular, in light of the national strategic needs under the "Belt and Road" initiative, it is important to discuss issues and strategies for implementing EAP and EOP teaching by considering the current educational status in vocational and higher education institutions, training objectives, societal talent demands, and student learning needs. This includes organically integrating variables such as curriculum development, textbook construction, teaching methods, teaching evaluation, and teacher training with the goals, nature, and connotations of EOP.

Thirdly, Chinese scholars should communicate more and share their views with overseas counterparts in the international academic community. As for the branches within the ESP field, international researches mainly focus on genre analysis of EAP, while Chinese publications center on EOP, especially business English. With the increasing interaction of China with other countries in the international political and economic fields, Chinese scholars need to actively participate in international

academic dialogues and do their part in promote Chinese culture, academic ideas, and scientific research achievements to foreign countries. Xu (2017), for example, proposed that Chinese scholars must deal with the issue of how they can make a voice in the international publishing circle. In order to comply with the trend of academic internationalization integrate China's talent demands into the global sphere, it is obvious that China should increase its research efforts on EAP. It is not only necessary to highlight the importance of EAP research, but also to introduce the results into EAP classroom teaching, especially to promote the cultivation of writing and reading abilities, so as to cultivate learners ability to hold academic exchanges with people around the world.

Fourthly, research methods need to be strengthened. Most foreign research were empirical studies (accounting for 88%), with a variety of methods, including quantitative, qualitative, and a combination of both. Among which, corpus based studies was the most common, accounting for 33%, which is often combined with genre analysis and quantitative research, and is more based on specialized corpora. This shows that the employment of corpus technology into ESP researches has become an academic hotspot in this field. In comparison, qualitative research is significantly more common than quantitative research. On one hand, qualitative research accounts for 24%, including case studies, ethnographic researches, and interviews. On the other hand, quantitative research accounts for 15%, including questionnaire surveys, teaching experiments, etc. In addition, an increasing number of studies choose to combine these two together, accounting for 16%.

Last but not the least, it is true that Chinese scholars have come to realize the importance of quantitative, qualitative, and corpus technologies in ESP research. For example, Wang(2012) believes that using corpus analysis methods to supplement traditional manual critical discourse analysis can break the boundaries between quantitative and qualitative research, making research results more comprehensive and reliable. ESP research publications in China, however, is still dominated by non-empirical studies (accounting for 79%), and research methods need to be improved (Huang & Xie, 2015). Therefore, it is necessary to have more empirical studies, combining quantitative and qualitative methods in particular, to make the research findings more scientific and persuasive. It is also necessary to construct relevant databases composed of naturally occurring structures and patterns of language use rather than intuitions or perceptions.

5. Conclusive Words

This comparative analysis of ESP research, spanning both international and Chinese scholarly contributions, unveils a tapestry of diverse perspectives and evolving trends. While Chinese scholars have adeptly integrated and adapted foreign theories and practices, they have also forged their own path, exploring ESP within the unique contours of China's educational landscape. The burgeoning focus on EOP, particularly within vocational education, reflects a pragmatic approach to addressing the nation's demand for skilled professionals equipped with specialized language abilities. Conversely, the growing emphasis on EAP in higher education signals a strategic move to align with the demands of academic

globalization and foster a generation of scholars capable of engaging in international discourse.

Despite these advancements, the field in China faces challenges that necessitate further exploration and refinement. A notable gap lies in the underrepresentation of EAP research, which is crucial for equipping students with the skills to navigate the complexities of academic writing and discourse in English. This lacuna requires attention, as it hinders the nation's potential to contribute meaningfully to the global academic community. Furthermore, the research landscape would benefit from a more robust engagement with empirical methodologies. The current dominance of non-empirical studies limits the field's capacity to generate data-driven insights and evidence-based practices. Embracing a wider array of research methods, including quantitative and qualitative approaches, would enhance the rigor and credibility of ESP research in China. The integration of information technology holds immense promise for transforming ESP teaching and learning. The utilization of digital tools and platforms can create dynamic and interactive learning environments, catering to diverse learning styles and fostering collaborative engagement among students.

In conclusion, the field of ESP in China stands at a pivotal juncture. By addressing the identified challenges and capitalizing on emerging opportunities, Chinese scholars can contribute significantly to the advancement of ESP globally. By embracing empirical research, fostering international collaboration, and leveraging technology, the field can continue to evolve, empowering learners to navigate the complexities of language in specific professional and academic contexts.

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Note

Note 1. An information technology construction project aimed at achieving the dissemination, sharing, and value-added utilization of knowledge resources