

The Handbook of
**English for
Specific
Purposes**



Edited by

**Brian Paltridge
and Sue Starfield**

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Editorial Offices

350 Main Street, Malden, MA 02148-5020, USA

9600 Garsington Road, Oxford, OX4 2DQ, UK

The Atrium, Southern Gate, Chichester, West Sussex, PO19
8SQ, UK

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Notes on Contributors

Francesca Bargiela-Chiappini is Honorary Associate Professor in the Centre of Applied Linguistics, University of Warwick, UK. She has published widely on business discourse and intercultural business communication.

Diane Belcher is Professor of Applied Linguistics at Georgia State University, a former co-editor of the journal *English for Specific Purposes*, and current co-editor of *TESOL Quarterly*. She also co-edits a teacher reference series titled *Michigan Series on Teaching Multilingual Writers*. She has authored a number of articles on advanced academic literacy and is currently at work on her seventh edited volume, on critical and corpus-based approaches to intercultural rhetoric.

Joel Bloch teaches ESL composition at The Ohio State University, Columbus, Ohio. He is the author of the book *Technologies in the Second Language Composition Classroom* and has authored several papers on intercultural rhetoric, plagiarism, and technology. He is currently completing a book on plagiarism and intellectual property law and researching multimodal literacies in the academic writing classroom.

Susan Bosher is Professor and Director of ESL in the English Department, St. Catherine University, St. Paul, Minnesota. She has taught an English for Nursing course for pre-nursing immigrant and international students since 2000. In addition, she has authored an English for Nursing textbook and co-edited a collection of essays for nurse educators on creating a more culturally inclusive environment in nursing education. She has also conducted workshops for nursing faculty on numerous topics related to ESL students in nursing.

Maggie Charles is a Tutor at Oxford University Language Centre, in the UK, where she specializes in teaching academic writing to graduates. She has published work on the pedagogical applications of corpus linguistics, the study of stance/evaluation and discipline-specific discourse, and has recently co-edited a volume entitled *Academic Writing: At the Interface of Corpus and Discourse* (with Diane Pecorari and Susan Hunston). She is also a consultant on academic writing for the *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary*.

Liz T. Chiang is a doctoral student in the Department of Language and Literacy Education in the Faculty of Education at the University of British Columbia, Canada. Her research interests include racial inequality, non-/native-speaker, and second language education.

Ulla Connor is the Barbara E. and Karl R. Zimmer Chair in Intercultural Communication at Indiana University in Indianapolis. Her research and teaching has been on multilingual writers. She is the author of numerous articles as well as the author of *Writing Across Languages* (1996) and *Intercultural Rhetoric in Second Language Writing* (2011). She is the founding organizer of the international conference Intercultural Rhetoric and Written Discourse.

Averil Coxhead is a Senior Lecturer in Applied Linguistics in the School of Linguistics and Applied Language Studies, Victoria University of Wellington, New Zealand. She is currently developing several vocabulary size tests, investigating approaches to teaching specialized vocabulary at secondary school level, and researching the phraseology of the Academic Word List.

Dan Douglas is an Emeritus Professor in the Applied Linguistics program at Iowa State University. He has published extensively on language assessment and language for specific purposes.

Dacia Dressen-Hammouda is currently an Associate Professor of English and Director of the Masters Program in Technical Documentation Design at Blaise Pascal University, Clermont-Ferrand, France. Her research interests include discoursal silence and writing expertise, L1/L2 writing pedagogy, genre analysis, ESP/EAP, intercultural technical communication and user studies.

Christine B. Feak is a Lecturer in English for Academic Purposes at the University of Michigan English Language Institute, Ann Arbor, Michigan, where she teaches both speaking and writing courses. In addition to co-authoring textbooks with John Swales on academic writing, she is co-author of *Academic Interactions: Communicating on Campus*, a corpus-informed academic speaking textbook.

Gibson Ferguson is a Senior Lecturer at the University of Sheffield, UK, and Director of the MA programme in Applied Linguistics. He researches in the areas of language policy, teacher education and ESP/EMP and has published in such journals as *English for Specific Purposes*, *International Journal of Applied Linguistics*, *International Journal of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism*, and *World Englishes*. He is also the author of *Language Planning and Education* (2006).

John Flowerdew is a Professor in the Department of English, City University of Hong Kong. His research interests include discourse analysis and English for specific purposes. Among other books, he has published *Academic Listening: Research Perspectives; Research Perspectives on English for Academic Purposes* (with Matthew Peacock); *Academic Discourse, Second Language Listening: Theory and Practice* (with Lindsay Miller); and *Lexical Cohesion and Corpus Linguistics* (with Michaela Mahlberg). His latest books are *Advances in Discourse Studies* (edited with Vijay Bhatia and Rodney Jones) and *Critical Discourse Analysis in Historiography*.

Lynne Flowerdew teaches and carries out research at the Hong Kong University of Science and Technology. Her research and teaching interests include corpus linguistics, genre analysis and EAP/ESP curriculum design and methodology. She has published widely in different areas of corpus linguistics in international journals and refereed edited collections. Her most recent books are *New Trends in Corpora and Language Learning*, co-edited with Ana Frankenberg-Garcia and Guy Aston, and an authored book *Corpora and Language Education*.

Christine C. M. Goh is Associate Professor of Applied Linguistics in the National Institute of Education, Singapore (Nanyang Technological University). Her interests include development and assessment of listening and speaking, and the role of metacognition in L2 learning. She has authored many international journal articles, books and book chapters on these topics.

Alan Hirvela is an Associate Professor at Ohio State University. He taught previously at the Chinese University of Hong Kong. In addition to his article and book publications, he is currently co-editor (with Diane Belcher) of *TESOL Quarterly*.

Ken Hyland is Professor of Applied Linguistics and Director of the Centre for Applied English Studies at the University of Hong Kong. He has published over 150 articles and 14 books on language education and academic writing. He was founding co-editor of the *Journal of English for Academic Purposes* and is now co-editor of *Applied Linguistics*.

Ann M. Johns, Professor Emerita of Linguistics and Writing Studies (San Diego State University), has devoted her academic career to ESP issues. Her research in the 1970s and 1980s was on English for Business and Economics (EBE); but she soon turned to, and has remained with, English for Academic Purposes (EAP), especially as it

relates to novice students. Her five books and her more than sixty articles and book chapters focus principally upon genre pedagogies and student learning in secondary and post-secondary contexts both in the United States and abroad. She served as co-editor of *English for Specific Purposes Journal* (1985–93), and she continues to review manuscripts from five international journals.

Ryuko Kubota is Professor in the Department of Language and Literacy Education in the Faculty of Education at the University of British Columbia, Canada. She has many publications in edited books and journals such as *English for Specific Purposes*, *Journal of Second Language Writing*, and *TESOL Quarterly*. Her research interests include critical applied linguistics and second language writing.

Meredith Marra is a member of the Wellington Language in the Workplace Project team and a Senior Lecturer at Victoria University of Wellington, New Zealand, where she teaches a range of courses in sociolinguistics and workplace discourse. Her primary research interest is the language of business meetings, and she has published in the areas of humor and gender in workplace interactions. Her latest research focuses on intercultural interaction involving skilled migrants in the New Zealand workplace.

Carol Lynn Moder is Professor of Linguistics and TESL at Oklahoma State University. From 2004–2006, she held contract grants with the International Training Division of the US Federal Aviation Administration to develop an Aviation English curriculum for International Air Traffic Controllers. She served as a consultant to ICAO in 2005, participating in the development of the CD of ICAO rating samples.

Hilary Nesi is a Professor in English language at Coventry University, UK. Her research interests include English for Academic Purposes, and the design and use of lexical reference tools. She was principal investigator for the

project to create the *BASE* corpus of British Academic Spoken English, and for the *BAWE* corpus project “An Investigation of Genres of Assessed Writing in British Higher Education”.

Catherine Nickerson is an Associate Professor of Business Communication in the College of Business Sciences at Zayed University in the United Arab Emirates. She has held senior positions in India and in the Netherlands, and has also lived and worked in the United States and the United Kingdom. Her current research interests include the use of English as an international language in business contexts and the communication of Corporate Social Responsibility.

Jill Northcott is a Lecturer and Head of English for Business and Law at the English Language Teaching Centre (formerly IALS), University of Edinburgh, UK.

Brian Paltridge is Professor of TESOL at the University of Sydney, Australia. He has published in the areas of English for specific purposes, genre analysis, academic writing, and discourse analysis. He is a former editor of the journal *English for Specific Purposes*.

Jean Parkinson is a Lecturer in Applied Linguistics in the School of Linguistics and Applied Language Studies, Victoria University of Wellington, New Zealand. She has published in the areas of language for science and technology and writing pedagogy. Her current interest is in the language used to discuss qualitative and quantitative research results.

Paul Prior is a Professor of English and the Center for Writing Studies at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. Extending earlier studies of genre, voicing, literate activity, chronotopic lamination, and disciplinarity, he is currently working on studies of semiotic remediation practices in academic and everyday settings.

William Rozycki is a Professor in the Center for Language Research, University of Aizu, and chair of the IEEE Professional Communication Society, Japan chapter. His research interest is the discourse of engineering, with a special focus on the oral presentation practices of non-native English-speaking engineers.

Sue Starfield is an Associate Professor in the School of Education and Director of the Learning Centre at the University of New South Wales, Australia. She is co-editor of the journal *English for Specific Purposes* and co-author of *Thesis and Dissertation Writing in a Second Language*. Her research interests include advanced academic writing and research genres and identity in academic writing.

Paul Thompson is a Senior Lecturer in Corpus Linguistics in the Department of English at the University of Birmingham, UK, and Director of the Centre for Corpus Research. He is currently developing large-scale multidisciplinary corpora of doctoral theses and of research articles, and is also involved in the development of corpus-informed language learning materials for second language learners.

Zuocheng Zhang is a Lecturer in TESOL at the University of New England, Australia. His research interests focus on business discourse, English for specific purposes, multimodality, and discourse and identities and he has published extensively in these areas. He is currently collaborating on a research project on contemporary Chinese business discourse supported by the Program for Innovative Research Team and the “211 Program” at the University of International Business and Economics, Beijing, China.

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Introduction

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.

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,