

## What do ESP practitioners need to know? A reflective article on ESP practitioners' knowledge base

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### Abstract

This reflective article explores the critical knowledge base required for English for Specific Purposes (ESP) practitioners to effectively facilitate students' development of *discursive competence* within academic and professional contexts. The article discusses the significance of *specialised knowledge* encompassing disciplinary cultures, epistemologies, and genre awareness, arguing that such knowledge is essential for ESP practitioners to navigate and integrate into various professional communities. It also emphasises the importance of *interdisciplinary collaboration* with subject specialists to enhance course relevance and authenticity. The reflection culminates in advocating for improved teacher training programs that emphasise specialised education for ESP practitioners, promoting continuous professional development and further research in the Argentinean context. By addressing these areas, the article aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of the ESP practitioners' necessary competencies for fostering students' engagement in their respective disciplinary cultures.

*Key words:* ESP practitioners, discursive competence, specialised knowledge, interdisciplinary collaboration

### Resumen

Este artículo reflexivo explora los conocimientos que los profesionales de Inglés para Fines Específicos (IFE) necesitan para facilitar el desarrollo eficaz de la competencia discursiva de los estudiantes en contextos académicos y profesionales. Recorremos la importancia del conocimiento especializado, que comprende las culturas disciplinares, las epistemologías y el género, conocimiento que es considerado esencial para que estos profesionales se integren en diversas comunidades disciplinares. También subrayamos la importancia del trabajo colaborativo-interdisciplinar con especialistas para mejorar la pertinencia de los cursos de IFE. Abogamos por la mejora de los programas de formación en los profesorado, haciendo hincapié en la educación especializada para los profesionales de IFE, y promoviendo el desarrollo profesional continuo y la investigación

en Argentina. Al abordar estas áreas, el artículo contribuye a una comprensión más profunda de las competencias necesarias de los profesionales de IFE para fomentar la participación activa de los estudiantes en sus culturas disciplinares.

*Palabras claves:* profesionales de IFE, competencia discursiva, conocimiento especializado, trabajo colaborativo interdisciplinario

## Introduction

Teaching 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” (Paltridge & Starfield, 2013, p. 2). At the higher level, ESP is primarily aimed at helping specific groups of students to become active members of particular disciplinary communities (Bruce, 2011; Ding & Bruce, 2017; Hamp-Lyons, 2011; Hyland, 2018, 2022). Although it originated as a branch of English language teaching, today ESP is more than a pedagogical approach, as it has acquired the status of an independent academic discipline, of global importance in the field of applied linguistics, with a strong research-supported basis and an abundant body of literature (Bell, 2021; Ding, 2019, 2022; Ding & Bruce, 2017; Hyland & Jiang, 2021).

Most of the studies that make up ESP’s body of knowledge seem to have been focused on content rather than on its teaching approaches and methodologies, i.e., on the “what” of ESP rather than on the “how” (Watson Todd, 2003). In addition, Ding and Campion (2016) and Hamp-Lyons (2011) have argued that ESP methodology and teacher education have received insufficient attention. Bocanegra-Valle and Basturkmen (2019) add that little is known about the kinds of knowledge, skills and abilities ESP practitioners<sup>1</sup> need and how they are acquired and developed. In fact, it is hard to find published research on ESP practitioners’ education (Hyland & Jiang, 2021). Current literature has provided general views about knowledge in language teaching education (Clandinin & Connelly, 1987; Elbaz 1983; Kumaravadivelu, 2012; Schulman, 1986, 1987). However, as far as we are concerned, published work on the ESP practitioner knowledge base in the Argentinean context seems to be scarce.

Therefore, in this work we aim at providing a reflective account based on theoretical underpinnings of what knowledge may be necessary for the ESP practitioner to have in order for students to develop their discursive competence. The paper is organised as follows: First, we will refer to the concept of *discourse competence*. Then, we will focus on the *specialised knowledge* an ESP practitioner may need to have. After that, we will outline some ideas regarding the way in which this knowledge can be acquired. Finally, we will offer some critical reflections based on the literature consulted.

## What kind of knowledge does an ESP practitioner need in order to operate effectively within academic and professional contexts?

As was previously stated, experts in the field of teaching ESP suggest that, in order for students to communicate and participate effectively in their disciplinary

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<sup>1</sup> Here, and every single time we mention the word “practitioner” we are referring to ESP professionals. In Ding and Bruce’s words (2017) “practitioner” is a self-designated appellation, or more accurately a community-designated one. It is not one that is recognised institutionally, and it is a term that covers the many and diverse appellations for ESP professionals such as support workers, professional or teaching-only, teaching fellows, instructors, or lecturers. Also, the term encompasses the many roles the ESP professional has: course designers, materials providers, collaborators with subject specialists, researchers and evaluator of courses, among others.

cultures, there needs to be an integration of specific knowledge and skills (Ding & Bruce, 2017; Bruce 2021). Therefore, ESP is not centrally focused on general language proficiency development (through courses whose aims and objectives are expressed in relation to mastery of elements of the language system), but rather focused on the processing and creation of language as it is used in academic contexts (Ding & Bruce, 2017). This knowledge integration is sometimes referred to as *discourse competence* or what Bhatia (2004) terms *discursive competence*, which includes the three subsuming areas of *social competence*, *generic competence* and *textual competence*. In this way, Bhatia (2004) proposes the term *discursive competence* to refer to a general concept to cover various levels of competence every ESP practitioner needs in order to expertly operate within well-defined professional as well as general socio-cultural contexts, and differentiates three consisting levels:

- *Social competence* incorporates an ability to use language more widely to participate effectively in a variety of social and institutional contexts to give expression to one's social identity, in the context of constraining social structures and social processes.
- *Generic competence* means the ability to identify, construct, interpret and successfully exploit a specific repertoire of professional, disciplinary or workplace genres to participate in the daily activities and to achieve the goals of a specific professional community.
- *Textual competence* represents not only an ability to master the linguistic code, but also an ability to use textual, contextual and pragmatic knowledge to construct and interpret contextually appropriate texts.

To effectively facilitate students' engagement in their respective disciplinary cultures, it is crucial for ESP practitioners to integrate specific knowledge and skills. That is to say, the ESP professional needs to develop his/her own discourse competence (language as it is embedded in the practices, discourses and texts of the academic world) in order to be able to help students develop their capacity to understand and use language in different contexts and their awareness of the discursive influences on language that arise from context. Consequently, a key consideration arises regarding the kind of knowledge required by ESP practitioners.

### **What knowledge should ESP practitioners possess to get students to develop discursive competence?**

A central question posed in this reflective article is what knowledge an ESP practitioner should possess. Given that ESP practitioners carry out their practice in different contexts and across diverse disciplines, it has been argued that they require a certain level of expertise in the specific discipline they are teaching. Ferguson (1997) highlights several reasons for this, including the need to use authentic materials from the field, the priority of understanding semantic information, and the prevention of misinterpretations when specialist knowledge is missing. Ferguson (1997) defines specialist knowledge as “knowledge of the subject matter of the discipline or profession of the students taught” (p. 80). While this perspective on the necessity of expertise on the discipline seems legitimate and, in many cases, self-evident, it overlooks other critical types of knowledge central to the main goal of ESP courses, specifically, as stated previously, to get students to develop discursive competence (Dudley-Evans, 1997). Therefore, instead of viewing ESP practitioners as disadvantaged by the lack of specialist knowledge, it can be argued that it is essential to focus on developing what Ferguson

(1997) terms “specialised knowledge”, which includes *knowledge of disciplinary culture*, *knowledge of epistemologies of different disciplines*, and *knowledge of genre*.

Specialised knowledge extends beyond the specific content of the disciplines and explores, in the first place, the culture of the discipline. This includes its forms of communication, the modes of publication, the status of the discipline, the communicative events in which members of the community engage, among other aspects (Ferguson, 1997). Such knowledge emphasises not only the authenticity of texts and materials but also focuses on how these texts function within the discourse community. Apart from the knowledge on the disciplinary culture, it is crucial for the ESP practitioner to grasp the epistemological foundations of the discipline, specifically, how knowledge is constructed and the mode of thought it fosters (Dudley-Evans, 1997; Ferguson, 1997). That is to say, the ESP practitioner needs to know, for instance, whether a particular discipline favours a positivist methodology or a more personal humanistic approach, features of the students' discipline that may not be immediately apparent to the students. Once the ESP practitioner understands both the disciplinary culture and the epistemological base of the discipline, the third essential type of knowledge is knowledge of genre. As genres are the primary means by which disciplines organise, socialise, communicate, and evolve, they serve as key communicative vehicles for linguistic analysis (Dudley-Evans, 1997; Ferguson, 1997).

In this article, we place particular emphasis on specialised knowledge to address the question posed in this section. By having specialised knowledge, ESP practitioners can distinguish the main communicative purposes of different disciplines, and the values associated with them to focus on the culture of the discipline when proposing pedagogical practices. Furthermore, specialised knowledge enables ESP practitioners to recognise and appreciate, at least, the modes of thought instead of delving deeply into its concepts and theories facilitating the development of relevant pedagogical tasks. At this point, a word of caution is necessary. While it is important to highlight that students bring expertise in their subject discipline, teachers are expected to bring linguistic expertise and knowledge of language teaching methodology (Alexander et al., 2008), teaching in ESP can be seen as more than collaborative. As Campion (2012, 2016) reveals in her studies, the greatest differences between teaching English for general purposes and English for specific purposes concern the development of the *specialised knowledge* needed to teach ESP. Finally, specialised knowledge empowers ESP practitioners to make intentional lexicogrammatical choices that impact the community discourse and, therefore, help students understand how knowledge is constructed within that discipline. Having distinguished the types of knowledge ESP practitioners should possess, based on the literature, and emphasised the importance of specialised knowledge, it becomes essential to consider how ESP practitioners can acquire this knowledge.

### **How can the ESP practitioner acquire this specialised knowledge?**

In seeking to provide a critical approach to understanding the knowledge base of ESP, Bruce (2011, 2017) and Ding and Bruce (2017) suggest considering the contributions of important research streams that have influenced syllabi, classroom materials and pedagogy in ESP, specifically: systemic functional grammar, genre theory, corpus linguistics, academic literacies, and critical English for academic purposes. In recent years, a particular perspective, also worth mentioning, has emerged in genre studies: critical genre analysis (CGA), resulting from genre analysis and critical discourse analysis.

According to Hyland (2004, 2013), the results of genre studies have had a major impact on language teaching for specific purposes. This is because genre descriptions ground teaching in research and support learners through an explicit understanding of how the texts under study are structured and why they are written as they are written. A genre-based approach would make it possible to answer some of the questions that Bruce (2008, 2011, 2013) raises as a basis to connect the what and the how: How do experts in this subject see and use knowledge? How is new knowledge in this subject communicated? What parts of the text specifically orient or speak directly to the reader? What are the language features that show the writer's attitude toward the text and its content? What are the language features of the text that attempt to influence or persuade the reader in some way? What language features of the text are regular or used to connect ideas? What pattern seems to be used to organise the content of these texts? What sections of the text are intended to communicate a particular type of knowledge (e.g., describe data, describe a process, present contrastive arguments)? How is the information of this type of knowledge organised? What language features characterise the wording of this section of the text? In short, as Bhatia (2004) puts it: Why do professionals write the way they do? And how do they appropriate, manipulate and exploit linguistic and semiotic resources to achieve professional goals?

To answer these questions, we suggest following Bhatia's (2004) multidimensional perspective framework to analyse the discipline genres that are prototypical in one's working context. This multidimensional approach to genre-based analysis of written discourse draws on textual data, ethnographic data, socio-cognitive and institutional data (Bhatia, 2004, 2015, 2017), which makes it a reliable tool to gather information to sensitise students to genres. The analytical approach proposed by Bhatia consists of collecting data by:

- *Placing the given genre-text in a situational context.* First, the genre under analysis should be placed in a situational context and intuitively analysed from the analyst's prior experience, internal clues in the text and background knowledge of the specialist's discipline.
- *Surveying existing literature.* This includes (a) literature on linguistic analysis of the genre, tools, methods or theories of linguistic/discourse/genre analysis which might be relevant to one's specific situation; (b) practitioner advice, guide books, manuals relevant to the community in question; (c) discussions of the social structure, interactions, history, beliefs, goals, among others, of the professional or academic community that uses the genre in question.
- *Refining situational analysis.* Having intuitively placed the text in a situational context, one needs to refine the analysis by defining the writer, the audience, their relationship and their goals; defining the historical, socio-cultural, and/or occupational placement of the community in which the discourse takes place; identifying the network of surrounding texts and identifying the topic/subject which the text is trying to represent.
- *Selecting the corpus.* Selecting the right kind and size of corpus needs defining the genre one is working with. This definition may be based on the communicative purposes and the situational context in which it is generally used. It is also necessary to decide on one's criteria for an adequate selection of the corpus.
- *Applying textual, intertextual and interdiscursive perspectives.* This is done through analysis of the lexico-grammar, text patterning, discourse structuring and the role of intertextuality and interdiscursivity. Level 1: Analysis of lexico-grammatical features. Level 2: Analysis of text patterning or textualization. Level 3: Structural interpretation of the text-genre.

- *Carrying out an ethnographic analysis.* This may be done through applying ethnographic procedures, such as detached observational accounts of expert behaviour, lived experiences of expert members of the community, narrative accounts of first-hand experiences of active professionals, among others.
- *Studying the institutional context.* Studying the institutional context may include an analysis of the disciplinary conventions that govern the use of language in such institutional settings and an analysis of the organisational context, if this is considered to have influenced the genre construction in any way.

Putting this analytical framework into practice, especially before embarking on the task of materials design, can help develop research-based materials and sensitize students to phenomena characteristic of the genre addressed. Consequently, at university level, in particular, it is essential to know, in a well-founded way, the disciplinary cultures, beyond the language that characterises each genre. Understanding and teaching the above-mentioned aspects are some of the essential skills for the practice of ESP to adequately address the needs of students (Bruce, 2013).

### **What role does interdisciplinary collaboration play?**

Another important skill an effective ESP practitioner may need to have is the capacity to work closely with subject specialists: the professors that teach the rest of the curriculum courses. González Ardeo (2008) and Bocanegra-Valle (2012) call this interdisciplinary collaboration (IC). González Ardeo (2008) defines IC as the incorporation of didactic materials, such as topics and activities, taught in other courses, as well as the participation of the specialists teaching those subjects into the ESP course. He further states that ESP practitioners must offer their students activities that are very close to their professional environment and training. In other words, in the ESP course, students must be familiarised with the most common genres of their chosen future profession and how their specific community develops and communicates their subject knowledge. On her part, Bocanegra-Valle (2012) presents IC as a way for the ESP practitioner to gain more subject knowledge by actively working with the specialists of those subjects.

#### **How can IC be conducted?**

There are different ways in which this collaboration can be carried out. Bocanegra-Valle (2012) mentions two main modalities:

- (a) Team teaching: the ESP practitioner and the professor of a specific subject design and teach the language course together.
- (b) Subject-language integration: the collaboration between the ESP practitioner and the subject specialist is limited to cooperation prior to the design and implementation of the ESP course.

The author also lists a series of specific actions that subject specialists could take to assist the ESP practitioner in the language course design and implementation. For example, they could collaborate by:

- helping with the needs analysis that leads to the delineation of consistent objectives;
- advising on the development of the syllabus so that this can address the fundamental contents and adapt them appropriately in relation to the previous and subsequent academic knowledge;
- assisting in the development of units, by ensuring the relevance of the texts and the subject terminology chosen for the course;

- advising on the preparation of activities by providing details that guarantee their authenticity;
- recommending books and other resources to facilitate the ESP practitioner's selection of materials and design of activities;
- making themselves available as a source of continuous information that allows the ESP practitioner to gradually get acquainted with at least basic issues of the specific subject.

### **What are the possible benefits of IC?**

In the context of higher education, IC of ESP practitioners and subject specialists can have several advantages, both for students and faculty.

On the one hand, students can further develop their skills and abilities, as previously summarised in Bhatia's (2004) conception of discursive competence, by actively participating in the integration of the ESP course and the main subject courses that make up their curriculum. If they address the same genres and learn about the same main contents in the ESP class as they normally do in the other courses, students can more easily relate to the ESP discipline and feel more confident about the knowledge of the topics they read about.

As far as ESP practitioners are concerned, González Ardeo (2008) proposes that IC may be a way to challenge the misconception that ESP courses are part of an "atypical department". We agree with the author in concluding that IC can help bridge the gap between the language course, often perceived as foreign by students of scientific disciplines, and the actual science departments. IC can place ESP practitioners on an equal footing with the rest of the faculty and, in this way, improve their frail status within academia. Nevertheless, we do acknowledge the difficulties of embarking on the complex task of collaborating with subject specialists: time constraints need to be taken into consideration, and specialists may be reluctant to what they may gain from such collaboration, if they are willing to collaborate at all, among other limitations.

## **Final thoughts**

This paper has presented a reflective account based on theoretical underpinnings of what knowledge the ESP practitioner should have in order for students to develop their discursive competence. While the scope of this contribution does not allow for generalisations, it does, at least, allow for a position to be taken. Thus, we strongly believe, along with Bruce (2008, 2013, 2017), that ESP practitioners should help students develop their discursive competence. To do so, ESP practitioners need a solid knowledge base to inform their teaching and researching activities. As we have pointed out, ESP requires specialised knowledge and interdisciplinary collaboration. To acquire specialised knowledge and to be able to work interdisciplinarily, we conceive that ESP requires specialist teacher education. In addition to the general English language teaching education, usually offered in English teaching training programmes, more appropriate pre-service training is needed in teacher training institutions. We also hold that in order to contribute to the development of students' discursive competence, a strong commitment of ESP practitioners to their continuous professional development is desirable. What is more, we consider it essential to create conditions for the knowledge base of ESP practitioners to be developed, for example by offering more teaching and researching ESP-specific training courses and qualifications. Therefore, teacher training institutions should direct efforts towards the implementation of language policies that support the development of ESP specialised training and research. Teacher education programs can overcome some of these challenges by fostering peer observation or sharing practice

(Campion, 2012, 2016), offering specific postgraduate courses and master degrees, among others. Finally, taking into consideration that few studies have addressed the ESP practitioners' knowledge base in the Argentinean context, we hope to promote reflection and further research on this topic.

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