



ILCEA

Revue de l'Institut des langues et cultures
d'Europe, Amérique, Afrique, Asie et Australie

40 | 2020

**English for Specific Purposes (ESP) and the
Underlying Dynamics of Power, Empowerment and
Disempowerment**

Foreword

Avant-propos

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Electronic version

URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/ilcea/10457>

DOI: [10.4000/ilcea.10457](https://doi.org/10.4000/ilcea.10457)

ISSN: 2101-0609

Publisher

UGA Éditions/Université Grenoble Alpes

Printed version

ISBN: 978-2-37747-204-8

ISSN: 1639-6073

Electronic reference

Shaeda Isani and Séverine Wozniak, « Foreword », *ILCEA* [Online], 40 | 2020, Online since 04 June 2020, connection on 24 September 2020. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/ilcea/10457> ; DOI : <https://doi.org/10.4000/ilcea.10457>

This text was automatically generated on 24 September 2020.

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Foreword

Avant-propos

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- 1 Reflection on the notion of language as a primordial locus of power is as old as speech itself as attested by the emblematic “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God” or, some millennia later, Aristotle’s *Rhetoric* (4th century BC), possibly the earliest ‘academic’ text on the subject of persuasion. In a leap forward to more contemporaneous times and concerns, works such as Fowler et al.’s *Language and Control* (1979), and Fairclough’s *Language and Power* (1989) ushered in a new approach to the debate through the perspective of militant critical discourse analysis (CDA) and its focus on how language is used to construct, consolidate and perpetuate power and ideology.
- 2 Essentially practice-orientated in its approach, the bulk of ESP research has traditionally been concerned with needs analysis and the related lexico-grammatical, rhetorical and discursive analysis of specialised genres. In its endeavour to equip learners with the language tools of communication needed to function adequately in the workplace, ESP’s overarching finality may be seen in terms of Benthamian-like utilitarianism in that “it tends to produce benefit, advantage, pleasure, good, or happiness... [and] prevent the happening of mischief, pain, evil, or unhappiness to the party whose interest is considered” (1780: II). In this light, the dynamics of the power, empowerment and disempowerment tryptic appear syllogistically but deceptively simple when applied to the ESP context: individuals, whether domestic or foreign, unversed with the specialised language of the work place find themselves in a state of aphasiac disempowerment when projected into the midst of an alien specialised community.
- 3 Viewed as such, ESP is seen as a form of economic, social and intellectual promotion which empowers learners with the specialised language, discourse and culture necessary to function and flourish in their professional environment. Furthermore, even narrow-angled, near-transfer ESP facilitates learners’ general sense of confidence and empowerment if we are to judge by a recent survey of university engineering students in Austria and Spain which revealed that an overwhelming 87.37% of the

respondents replied that their ESP courses boosted their “overall confidence” (Arnó-Macià, Aguilar-Pérez & Tatzl, 2020: 70), an essential behavioural element of empowerment which contributes to bridging the gap and reinforcing the natural overlaps between ESP and EGP.

- 4 Even though the narrow-angled ESP approach continues to retain some validity today, particularly in the narrow context of limited needs in exolingual environments,¹ the maturing of the discipline and its global dimension have rendered it a more complex domain with highly textured defining parameters involving locus (endo- or exolingual learning? in situ or institutional?), learner profiles (migrants or native law school graduates? young or mature students?), subject domain (hospitality industry, medicine or musicology?) and, finally, the sempiternal question of needs (present or future? narrow- or broad-angled? top-down or bottom-up? neutral or ideological?). This constantly shifting set of parameters makes ESP a chameleon discipline, constantly in need of adapting and adjusting to an ever-fluctuating *hic et nunc*.
- 5 Evolution in social thinking in certain countries of the Anglosphere—the USA and Australia, for example—saw the emergence of a more critical stance to ESP goals which queried a number of the foundational tenets of the discipline, such as an exclusively work-related focus on needs analysis or the domination of genres. Compliance with norms defined elsewhere and top-down was seen as a servile perpetuation of Establishment and corporate—not to mention capitalistic—norms. Cleo Cherryholmes (1988), writing with regard to education in general, condemned such conformist approaches as “vulgar pragmatism”, advocating instead “critical pragmatism” which seeks to broaden the conservative norms of the education system towards more personal fulfilment. Sarah Benesch (1993) and Alastair Pennycook (1994) subsequently applied such reasoning to ESP objectives leading a number of critics to view ESP as prioritising work integration over social integration and raising concerns about enculturation and conditioning learners’ source and target identities (also see Çubukçu, 2010).
- 6 Though largely an Anglosphere debate until recently, such questions are now beginning to raise interest in the European sphere of ESP studies as well, in particular with regard to the power dynamics underlying the highly normative ethos of ESP genres which possess “a high level of rhetorical sophistication, the keys to which are offered solely to their members” (Orts, Breeze & Gotti, 2017: 9). Though genres are primarily intended to unify and facilitate knowledge sharing and communication between the diverse and dispersed, multilingual and multicultural members of specialised discourse communities, they are also perceived as “an enabling mechanism for domination [...] of subordinate groups” (Simpson & Mayr, 2010: 2) by expert elites, as agencies of institutional, organisational and individual interests vested with a controlling gate-keeping function of access to discourse communities which they “dominate, police and protect as their particular area of expertise” (Orts, Breeze & Gotti, 2017: 9).
- 7 Corollary to this, but relatively less investigated, is the notion of implicit consent and compliance (and thus legitimation of the ruling group of experts) by which adhesion to the dominant discourse is seen as a necessary means of gaining recognition—and subsequent power—through access to the much sought-after “club”, a process the new initiates will in turn replicate, thus confirming the Bourdieusian theory of transmission and perpetuation of elite values.

- 8 This volume contains no contributions specifically dedicated to empowerment. A more complex notion, it has perhaps not had the same resonance in Europe as it has in America and Australia, for example, as indicated by French-Canadian development sociologist Anne Emmanuèle Calvès when she says “the infatuation with empowerment in the English-speaking world appears boundless” (2009: 1). One reason for the relatively low interest in this line of enquiry may lie in the fact that it is used varyingly according to disciplines and is, therefore, somewhat of a problematic concept, as Heljä Antola Robinson points out when she says, “Empowerment is individual and collective; it is power and freedom; it is external and internal, political and personal, a means to an end and its own reward” (1994: 12). The polysemous nature of the term (see Lincoln, Travers, Ackers & Wilkinson, 2002) is reflected at dictionary level as well, as illustrated by two entries found in the Merriam-Webster online for the verb ‘to empower’: (a) “to give official authority or legal power”; (b) “to promote the self-actualization or influence of”. If the first, legal acceptance is a long-established one dating from 1651, the second is a relatively recent, cross-specialisation borrowing² dating to its adoption by American social scientists and community psychologists in the 1980s. In this second context, the term is central to the rhetoric of studies related to improving the social and personal status of the marginalised (by disability, race, ethnicity, religion, gender, etc.) through teaching approaches which would enable learners to make their own choices as individuals and social beings. Like another similar borrowing—‘literacy’—it is not sure that the borrowed specialised meaning carries equal resonance with non-specialists as the original does.
- 9 While such studies abound in America, the impact has still to become mainstream in European countries. This also helps to explain some of the dividing lines between ESP studies as viewed, for example, in such English-speaking countries as America and Australia, on the one hand, and France on the other, particularly with reference to learner profiles: in America and Australia, ESP is taught in an endolingual context and often targets a population of non-English speakers who are newcomers to the language and culture of the host country and may lack a sound educational background. On the other hand, in France, for example, the bulk of formal LSP teaching and research is carried out at university level³ in exolingual learning contexts and largely concerns domestic university students who have been exposed to foreign languages, to a greater or lesser degree, throughout high school, have travelled to other countries, and whose *baccalauréat* (high-school leaving certificate) curriculum includes a challenging course in philosophy. In the former case, there is a large linguistic, cultural, critical and democratic deficit to build up compared to the latter where these same competencies are more developed. Hence, though acquisition of critical distance and literacy skills remains on the agenda, “empowerment”, with its ideologically loaded undertones of authority and control, may be the source of some unease in the ESP context. As pointed out by Calvès (2009: x), the less forceful and more neutral and consensual French equivalent of the term, “*autonomisation*”, carries no undertones of power or ideology. As such, it vectors the underlying objective of all learning, i.e. to render learners autonomous in their access to knowledge and the cognitive and personal skills needed for development of the self as individuals and citizens. As for the Bourdieusian-like charge of ESP replicating and transmitting norms established by a certain elite, just as sound ESP teaching practices follow an adopt-adapt-develop progression, there is little reason to expect less of the future professionals they address.

- 10 A more consensual view of empowerment dynamics in ESP studies concerns unequal or asymmetrical encounters in which the power of interaction is distributed unequally with the appropriation of discursive authority by the dominant collocutors (Fairclough, 1989), as so typically illustrated by doctor/patient, judge/defendant, journalist/interviewee, teacher/pupil, examiner/examinee, L1/L2 and men/women workplace situations of communication. Teacher-learner power asymmetry is particularly perceptible in French and other European academic cultures where faculty, though no longer gowned, still retains vestiges of mandarin status. In spite of this, there has been some research, in both ESP and non-ESP teaching perspectives, which has queried the entrenched teacher/learner asymmetry—heightened in the ESP context by the learner’s triple knowledge, language and culture deficit—and advocated a more symmetrical learner-empowered/ing approach (François, 1990; Isani, 1993a, 1993b; Marchive, 2005).
- 11 New forms of empowerment unavoidably create a corollary shift towards disempowerment. The most momentous instance of disempowerment in the context of language and ESP is undoubtedly the rise of English as a professional lingua franca (ELF). Divorced from the culture of its origins, the locus-free nature of ELF has led to the disenfranchisement of native models of English both in spoken and written, formal and informal professional genres, a disempowerment balanced by the parallel empowerment of millions of NNS. One emblematic example of such disempowerment is the status of the English language within the European Union where, Brexit notwithstanding, it might well continue to be the preferred language of communication in spite of the fact that none of the EU27 members claims it as its official language.
- 12 Broad-angled ESP studies interest themselves not only in the linguistic and discursive aspects of specialised communication but also in the specialised environment itself, its people, places, institutions and media, as manifested by French ESP studies defined in terms of the language-discourse-culture triangulation (Petit, 2002). In this context, another force of disempowerment worthy of interest in the ESP context is the tremendous upsurge in the use of social media and the parallel changes wrought in certain areas of professional practice as, for example, in the domain of pre-digital legacy media and journalism with the incipient disempowerment of traditional journalists and the empowerment of ‘citizen journalists’. Likewise, in the field of medicine and pharmacology, the rise of ‘amateur-specialists’—or even pseudo-specialists—for whom YouTube and other forums provide a platform to dispense unmediated ‘specialist’ advice, thus questioning the very notion of domain experts and expertise both as regards content and language. In this perspective, social media herald potent changes likely to impact other traditional key professionals—politicians, diplomats, lawyers and judges, bankers, managers, advertisers, teachers, etc.—, leaving those on the fringe of this culture of unmediated discourse with a profound sentiment of disempowerment.
- 13 Seven contributions and a foreword—representing seven countries and eight university affiliations—make up this issue of *ILCEA* online dedicated to ESP studies. One unusual aspect of this volume are the prefatory remarks by a well-known ESP researcher, Sue Starfield from the University of New South Wales. Co-editor of the 2013 ESP ‘Bible’, *The Handbook of English for Specific Purposes*, she very kindly agreed to cast an Australian

eye on ESP articles whose multicultural authors all have some professional European grounding.

- Ruth Breeze, from the University of Navarre (Spain), is co-editor (along with María Ángeles Orts Llopis and Maurizio Gotti) of *Power, Persuasion and Manipulation in Specialised Genres* (2017) which has paved the way for further enquiry into the problematisation of the power dynamics of ESP studies in Europe. Situated resolutely in the social media-dominated 21st century, her contribution to this volume belongs to the area of English for Legal Purposes and deals with the problematics of the power dynamics which underlie online dispute resolution.
 - Miguel Angel Campos-Prados and Isabel Balteiro, from the University of Alicante (Spain) explore hitherto uncharted avenues that distance us from the establishment of norms by the traditional elite of specialised communities towards the bottom-up imposition of transgressive lexical norms by fringe members of professional communities (the fashion industry, in this case) through their status as power-wielding ‘influencers’ on social media.
 - Malcom Harvey, from the University of Lyon 2 (France) also distances us from mainstream ESP/ELP (English for Legal Purposes) expectations by setting his study of power dynamics in what may possibly be the very first courtroom drama, Aeschylus’s *Oresteia* written during the 5th century BC. In a more ‘intellectual’ approach to ESP studies, he demonstrates that the legal and societal issues this 2 600-year old play addresses remain valid today and may, as such, be used meaningfully in ELP, in the same way as Shakespeare’s plays often are.
 - Olga Menagarishvili, from the Metropolitan State University in Minnesota (USA), discusses the underlying power dynamics behind the editing of science and technology dictionaries and describes the production-consumption cycles of such dictionaries with particular reference to the *McGraw-Hill Dictionary of Scientific and Technical Terms*.
 - Philippe Millot, from the University of Lyon 3 (France), situates his analysis in the field of BELF (Business English Lingua Franca) through analysis of three sources of qualitative data which reveal that, though ELF competences are acquired to suit ad hoc professional needs, a form of *phronesis* or ‘practical wisdom’ leads to them being transformed into formal norms used in the recruitment process of non-native professionals.
- 14 Our last two contributors take a step back from power, empowerment and disempowerment issues related to subject-domains to view ESP as a discipline per se.
- Nadežda Stojković, from the University of Niš (Serbia), echoes earlier concerns regarding the transformation of ESP into a ‘bankable’ discipline restricted to workplace language concerns and assessed in terms of performance, an approach which ignores the learner as a social being. While recognising the usefulness of ESP in gaining and maintaining employment, she advocates a more critical approach which would also allow for learners’ to achieve personal and social fulfilment.
 - Michel Van der Yeught, from Aix-Marseille University (France), views the ‘specialisedness’ of ESP through the prism of Searle’s theory of intentionality and explores the related aspects of power in relation to different aspects of the discipline, from its epistemological foundations, specialized communities, “deontic powers”, teaching, etc. Introducing the Searlian notion of “deontic powers” leads to revisiting some aspects of Fairclough’s *Language and Power* (1989) while the intentional approach questions the very concept of language having some form of power at all.
- 15 We hope our readers will find these contributions as stimulating and instructive as we did in preparing this issue of *ILCEA* online for publication and trust that this volume

will incite further ESP interest and investigation into this relatively underexplored aspect of ESP studies in Europe.

- 16 Before signing off, we would like to say a very special word of thanks to our reviewers, the all-important but unsung linchpin in the dissemination of scientific research. Without their unacknowledged, unpaid and often unappreciated work, the standards of research publications would be seriously compromised: to the 14 reviewers who so obligingly took on this ungrateful task, our sincere and grateful thanks.

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NOTES

1. One example of limited needs in an exolingual environment would be technicians working for the French aerospace industry in France whose objectives seek to go no further than to understand the technical specifications of documents written in English.
2. Such borrowings from one area of specialisation for application to another differ from semi-technical terms which refer to terms existing in general and specialised language but with differing signifiers (Parkinson, 2013: 166). Cross-specialisation borrowings are discussed by Isabel Balteiro in her analysis of the terminology of textiles when she refers to terms which “belong to other technical fields [and] are incorporated to or used in [another specialised] register” (2011: 69).
3. Which does not mean that ESP in undergraduate technical schools or the private sector does not adopt a more narrow-angled approach designed to meet more specific and/or immediate needs.

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