English for Specific Purposes: The state of the art
(An online interview with Ann M. Johns)

Ann M. JOHNS, San Diego State University, USA
M. A. SALMANI NODOUSHAN, Iranian Institute for Encyclopedia Research, Iran

This forum paper is based on a friendly and informative interview conducted with Professor Ann M. Johns. In providing answers to the interview questions, Professor Johns suggests that all good teaching is ESP, and also distinguishes between EOP and ESP in that the former entails much more "just in time" learning while the latter may be directed more at "just in case." She further adds 'context' as the sixth enduring conception to the list of the five concepts which, according to Swales (1990), underlie ESP. She further suggests that (a) Register Analysis, (b) Rhetorical Discourse Analysis, (c) Target Language Use Situation Analysis, and (d) Genre Analysis have had a major role in the development of ESP. As for CBI or CLIL, she suggests that there is much more to ESP than content, and emphasizes that ESP can account for the changing needs of learners in the twenty-first century by employing effective on-going needs assessment and target situation analysis. Towards the end of the interview, she presents her views on the future direction of ESP by suggesting that more serious research into target situations is needed, and invites ESP specialists to be more open, flexible, and sensitive to context.

Keywords: CLIL; ESP; Purpose; EAP; EOP; Genre Analysis; Needs Assessment; Target Situation Analysis

The Interview

MASN:[1] How would you define ESP today? Would you agree with Hutchinson and Waters (1987) that ESP can best be defined by saying what it is 'not' than what it is? If no, why and in what ways? Would your definition of ESP, like that of Dudley-Evans (1998), include almost all instances of language learning?

AMJ:[2] I agree much more with Dudley-Evans than with Hutchinson and

---

[1] Mohammad Ali Salmani Nodoushan
[2] Ann M. Johns

Waters. All good teaching is ESP, but most ESP teaching, at least in EFL contexts, has been directed towards adult (or near adult) academics and professionals—and that's where it is most effective.

MASN: How would you differentiate between ESP and EGP? How would you define 'purpose' in ESP today?

AMJ: In an article that will appear in a special issue of the *Journal of English for Academic Purposes*, "25 years after Genre Analysis," (2015), I explore Swales' evolving thinking about *purpose.* In the 1990 volume, he was specific about the relationships between genre and purpose. Now, he's not quite so sure. Nor am I. A single text from a genre may serve several purposes, for both writer and audiences.

MASN: How many types of ESP do you see both in the past and today? I mean, is it possible to claim that EOP, EST, and the like are different types of ESP? If not, how would you relate them?

AMJ: Donna Price and I have a chapter in the Celce-Murcia, et. al. (2014) volume that includes both EOP and EAP. Certainly, there are similarities, e.g., the on-going needs assessment and target situation analysis; however, the differences are considerable. One difference, certainly, is that EOP often entails much more "just in time" learning while EAP may be directed more at "just in case." Of course, all of this will depend upon how wide-angled the curriculum is. Note: I will be discussing "just in time" and "just in case" approaches at the TESOL Convention in Toronto in March, 2015.

MASN: As you know, Swales (1990) uses the term `enduring conceptions' to refer to what he finds to be the five concepts underlying ESP: (a) authenticity, (b) research-base, (c) language/text, (d) need, and (e) learning/methodology. Would you agree with Swales? What else would you see as crucial to ESP?

AMJ: I would agree with all of Swales' concepts, particularly the persistent, necessary research into both student needs and the target situation. I might add "context" to his list, as he no doubt would at this point in his career.

MASN: Would I be wrong if I agreed with Dudley-Evans (1997) that there are three features common to ESP: (a) authentic materials, (b) purpose-related orientation, and (c) self-direction? If yes, in what

ways?

AMJ: I am not sure about the self-direction concept, but the materials must be as authentic to the context as possible; and certainly, the curriculum (like all curricula) should be purposeful. Self-direction would depend upon who the students are, where they are studying, and other factors. I view ESP as more externally-directed.

MASN: Back in the 1990s, it was claimed by many scholars that ESP is protean in the sense that it is responsive to developments in all three realms of (a) language, (b) pedagogy, and (c) content studies. Do you see the same quality for ESP today?

AMJ: Perhaps it needs to be even more protean, sensitive to the context in which the teaching and learning is taking place, the time constraints, and, of course, the variety of content and professional studies in which the students are involved.

MASN: Many ESP professionals, specifically Robinson (1991), argue that ESP emerged as a result of three main concerns: (a) worldwide demands, (b) a revolution in linguistics, and (c) focus on the learner. Would you agree? Do you see any other factor, not stated in earlier research, which can be held responsible for the emergence of ESP?

AMJ: Traditionally, the learner as a psycho-socio being is much less the focus in ESP than, perhaps, in other approaches; however, the other two factors seem to be very important to the development of ESP. The learner's later responsibilities and demands upon him/her seem to be more relevant here.

MASN: Some people would say that ESP has undergone five major transformations: (a) Register Analysis, (b) Rhetorical Discourse Analysis, (c) Skills and Strategies, (d) Target Language Use Situation Analysis, and (e) A Learning-Centered Approach. Some would refer to these as ESP generations. What are your views on this? How many stages of evolution do you see in ESP? In what ways do your views differ from or confirm existing views on the evolution of ESP?

AMJ: It depends upon where you are and what you are reading. In my chapter on the history of ESP research (2013), I certainly mention a, b, and d, but where is genre in your list? Certainly Swales has had a major impact on how we approach Rhetorical Discourse Analysis.

MASN: As you know, Douglas (2000) expatiates on Chapelle's (1998) elaboration of what she herself calls an "interactionist view" of construct definition; Chapelle had argued that merely taking into account both the traits of the language user and the features of the context is not enough, and that we will have to allow for the interaction between the two. Such a perspective inevitably entails that the quality of each one changes. In other words, trait components can no longer be defined in context-independent, absolute terms; by the same token, contextual features cannot be defined without reference to their impact on underlying characteristics either. Douglas (2000) notices that such a view suggests that there is such a thing as LSP knowledge, and that the nature of language knowledge may be different from one domain to another. He takes the position, again following Chapelle (1998, p. 15), that what is required is a theory of "how the context of a particular situation within a broader context of culture, constrains the linguistic choices a language user can make during a linguistic performance." Bearing in mind that external context is a major factor in the engagement of SP communicative language ability, Douglas considers how language ability and SP background knowledge interact with each other. On this basis, he suggests an LSAP ability which seems to assume that ESP competence is different from Bachman's (1990) communicative language ability model. Do you see Douglas' conception as a valid and warranted view? Is it possible to claim, for instance, that airline pilots have an ESP competence which is different from their general language competence? What are your thoughts on the psychological reality of such LSP competencies?

AMJ: You have explained it well. As in the case of "critical thinking," competence depends upon prior knowledge and context. I would agree with you and Douglas.

MASN: Back to my previous question, if we agree for the time being that LSAP competencies have psychological reality, what implications for research and language teaching can there be?

AMJ: Hmm. This is a question for an entire article. I certainly believe that we are constructed by environments and experiences—so we need to think about how we are "constructing" our students in the classroom in preparation for their lives. It's a social/psychological reality, if anything.

MASN: How would you relate corpus linguistics to ESP? Do you see any interface between the two? If yes, how would you describe it? In your view, what are the original and/or optimal ways of using corpus studies in ESP research?

AMJ: Corpus linguistics has revolutionized ESP in many ways. Finally, we can really be authentic at the level of language. There are many ways to approach CL, all of which could be valid for an ESP curriculum.

MASN: How would you see ESP in the multimodal digital era? How would the rapid multimedia developments of the 21st century affect our understanding of ESP? How would such developments transform ESP?

AMJ: ESP should be affected at the very basic level, that is, multi-media should be a part of most of our research and pedagogies. As in all ESP, we need to see how technology is effectively used in the target situation and prepare our students for those eventualities.

MASN: What do you think the future directions of ESP research would be?

AMJ: More serious research into target situations with more sophisticated tools of which CL is an example. For a longer answer, see my "history of ESP research" article.

MASN: Are you for or against ESP and Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) or Content-Based Instruction (CBI)? Why? Why is it important?

AMJ: I have written about this, too, in a volume edited by Snow and Brinton. In most contexts, CBI is too devoted to topic—the content itself—and not to the values or genres of the content-creators or the strategies required to successfully exploit the content area. Tardy, Casanave, and others make this clear in their research on student initiations into discourse communities. There's much more to ESP than content.

MASN: What are your views on the best approaches to intercultural ESP studies?

AMJ: This again, is too broad a topic to discuss here—and others have done it better than I would.

MASN: How would you relate interpersonal metadiscourse and ESP?

AMJ: It is one of the many factors that should be considered in genre analysis. See Hyland's work, for example.

MASN: How can ESP account for the changing needs of learners in the twenty-first century?

AMJ: By employing effective, on-going, needs assessment and target situation analysis.

MASN: If you want to summarize the past traditions, current trends, and future directions in ESP, what would your summary look like?

AMJ: It would probably look like some of the articles and book chapters I have written. See, e.g., my chapter written with Donna Price or my chapter on ESP research in the Paltridge and Starfield volume.

MASN: Do you see anything else as a vital part of an account of 'the state of the art of ESP' which I have overlooked in my previous questions? If yes, what are they?

AMJ: I'm disappointed that there is not much here on genre and its central place in ESP studies. Swales and Feak (2012) have done a terrific job for graduate students, but we need sophisticated genre research in all areas and for all students.

MASN: Do you have any specific recommendations for ESP specialists and practitioners?

AMJ: I have been involved in ESP research and curriculum development for more than 30 years, and I continue to learn and revise my thinking. ESP specialists must be open, flexible, sensitive to context—and very good learners!

MASN: Thank you very much for accepting this interview invitation. It means a lot to me and the readers of the journal. You are an Icon, and it was a huge honor for me to be given the opportunity to conduct this interview. Thank you.

AMJ: Thank you. I enjoyed completing this interview.

The Authors

Ann M. Johns (Email: ajohns@cox.net), PhD, is Professor Emerita, Linguistics & Writing Studies, at San Diego State University. With John Swales, she was co-editor of the *English for Specific Purposes Journal.* In addition, she has written or edited five books and more than 70 articles on ESP, EAP, student learning and genre, particularly as it relates to pedagogy. See www.rohan.sdsu.edu/~annjohns/.

Mohammad Ali Salmani Nodoushan (Email: dr.nodoushan@gmail.com), PhD, is associate professor of Applied Linguistics at the Iranian Institute for Encyclopedia Research, Tehran, Iran. His main areas of interest include politeness and pragmatics. He has published around 50 articles in international academic journals, including *Teaching and Teacher Education*, *Speech Communication*, *Intercultural Pragmatics*, and *Pragmatics and Society*.

References

Bachman, L. F. (1990). *Fundamental considerations in language testing*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Belcher, D. (2004). Trends in teaching English for specific purposes. *Annual Review of Applied Linguistics, 24*, 165-86.

Belcher, D. (2009). What ESP is and can be: An introduction. In D. Belcher (Ed.), *English for Specific Purposes in Theory and Practice,* (pp. 1-20). Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.

Belcher, D., Johns, A. M., & Paltridge, B. (Eds.). (2011). *New directions in English for Specific Purposes research.* Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.

Chapelle, C. (1998). Construct definition and validity inquiry in SLA research. In L. F. Bachman & A. Cohen (Eds.), *Interfaces Between Second Language Acquisition and Language Testing Research*, (pp. 32-70). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Douglas, D. (2000). Assessing language for specific purposes. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Dudley-Evans T. (1997). *Developments in English for Specific Purposes*: *A multi-disciplinary approach*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Dudley-Evans, T. (1998). An overview of ESP in the 1990s. Paper presented at *The Japan Conference on English for Specific Purposes*, Fukushima.

Hutchinson, T., & Waters, A. (1987). *English for specific purposes: A learning*

centered approach. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Johns, A. M. (2009). Tertiary undergraduate EAP: Problems and possibilities. In D. Belcher (Ed), *English for Specific Purposes in Theory and Practice,* (pp. 41-59). Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.

Johns, A. M. (2013). The history of English for Specific Purposes research. In B. Paltridge & S. Starfield (Eds.), *The Handbook of English for Specific Purposes,* (pp. 5-30). Sussex: Wiley-Blackwell.

Johns, A. M. (in press). Moving on from *Genre Analysis*: An update and tasks for the transitional student. To appear in a special issue of the *Journal of English for Academic Purposes (JEAP),* "25 years after *Genre Analysis.*"

Johns, A. M., & Price, D. (2014). English for Specific Purposes: International in scope, specific in purpose. In M. CelceMurcia, D. M. Brinton, & M. A. Snow (Eds.), *Teaching English as a Second/Foreign Language* (4th ed.), (pp. 471-86). Boston: National Geographic/Heinle-Cengage.

Robinson, P. (1991). *ESP today: A practitioner's guide*. New York: Prentice Hall.

Swales, J. M. (1985). *Episodes in ESP*. Oxford: Pergamon Institute of English.

Swales, J. M. (1990). *Genre analysis: English in academic and research settings*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Swales, J. M., & Feak, C. B. (2012). *Academic writing for graduate students: Essential tasks and skills* (3rd ed.). Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.