

Trends In Esp Research Tradition: A Comprehensive Review of Research Designs in Ras Published Between 2008-2013

Merve GEÇİKLİ

Research Assistant of English Language Teaching
Atatürk University, PO Box 25240; State University
Erzurum 38000, Turkey

Abstract

This study surveys the evolution and current state of the research designs – qualitative, quantitative and mixed methods- applied in the inquiry process of research studies under the domain of English for Specific Purposes. The purpose of the study is to generate a discussion on methods in ESP research tradition. Thus, through the medium of a content analysis conducted on the articles published in two indexed online journals - English for Specific Purposes and English for Academic Purposes- during a five-year period (2008-2013) especially for this academic territory, this paper documents the prevalence degree of the methods adopted by the researchers in the field and the context-specific drives which promote the tendency in the employment mode of the designs. In general, the findings show that scholars and researchers involved in the field principally tend to employ on qualitative research designs in their studies rather than quantitative and mixed-research designs.

Keywords: English for Specific Purposes; Journals; Qualitative Methods; Quantitative Methods; Mixed Methods; Content Analysis

I. Introduction

ESP linguistic tradition is the location of Language for Specific Purposes, where the centrality is claimed on the study of contextualized language uses, more specifically, uses of English specific to contexts, and of specialized English pedagogy accomodating communities of different languagesto English-grounded academic, workplace and professional discourses. The origin of the field goes back to 1960s;however, the integration of genre analysis notion to ESP work and teaching by the authors of two seminal books, Swales (1990) and Bhatia (1993), has popularized the field as the areal destination for scholars and researchers of ESP within and across disciplines, borders, levels, and contexts.

Qua a growing body, English for Specific Purposes may be characterized as a scientific domain with the involvement of content features the term “science” possesses. In this regard, the scope of ESP corresponds to the definition of science set by Johnson and Christensen (2004) who labels the concept as “ an approach for the generation of knowledge that places high regard for empirical data and follows certain norms and practices that develop overtime because of their usefulness” (p.14) and states that it “ includes any systematic and carefully done actions that are carried out to answer questions or meet other needs of a developing research domain (e.g. describing things, exploring, experimenting, explaining, prediciting)” (p.14).

And, it seems that, covering such a dynamic and progressive stucture as described in “science”, ESP endeavours to ground its position as a scientific research field through the formations and reconstruction of paradigms by employing different research designs. Considering this point and focalizing on that research implementation is indispensable unit of discipline establishment process, the researcher attempts to explore the evolution and current state of the research designs – qualitative, quantitative and mixed methods- applied in research studies within the frame of English for Specific Purposes in the way to promote itself as an established discipline.

Accordingly, this paper provides a comprehensive review of studies produced in ESP between 2008-2013 to illustrate the research designs that have been mostly used in the field, and thus, to generate a discussion on methods in ESP research tradition. On this basis, the paper, primarily, offers the definition and the scope of quantitative, qualitative, and mixed research designs for deepening the knowledge and understanding of methods. Then, the study proceeds with the presentation of work done by involving the information on data collection and analysis procedure, and followingly, by demonstrating and discussing the findings of the study. It ends with the conclusion section where the researcher concludes with the specific results of research by briefly reflecting overall assumptions and provides pedagogical implications and the points which need further research.

II. Theoretical Frame

2.1. Quantitative Research

Quantitative research generally covers “a hypothesis being tested and the phrasing of the research questions which govern how data will be collected (i.e. a locally developed survey, commercial instrument, or final course grades) as well as the method of statistical analysis used to examine the data” (Creswell, 2002). Bryman (1988) defines quantitative research through the supplement of a comprehensive content of the quantitative based system by emphasizing the sophisticated manner of this research:

“Quantitative research is often conceptualized by its practitioners as having a structure in which theories determine the problems, to which researchers address themselves in the form of hypotheses derived from general theories. These hypotheses are invariably assumed to take the form of expectations about the likely causal connections between the concepts which are the constituent elements of the hypotheses. Because concepts... are frequently believed to be abstract, there is a need to provide operational definitions whereby their degrees of variation and co-variation can be measured. Data are collected by survey, experiment...Once the survey or experimental data have been collected, they are then analysed so that the causal connection specified by the hypothesis can be verified or rejected.” (p. 18)

In general, a research design of quantities kind generally tends to use numbers in the data collection and analysis process, to stress on the numbers directly relating to the measurement of specific points on individuals, and is commonly based on the comparison among groups or relation of factors about individuals. In the following section, the research designs which are presented under the title of quantitative research or directly related to it are offered.

2.1.1. Experimental Designs

The experimental design is an approach in which the researcher intervenes in the natural setting and control a number of variables to determine a causal relationship between two or more properties of an individual or unit. (Scott and Morisson, 2006; p.103)

2.1.2. Correlational Designs

Correlational designs are procedures in quantitative research in which investigators measure the degree of association (or relationship) between two or more variables using the statistical procedure of correlational analysis. This degree of association, expressed as a number, indicates whether the two variables are related or whether one can predict another. (Creswell, 2005;p.52)

2.1.3. Survey Designs

Survey design is 'an approach in which there is empirical research pertaining to a given point of time which aims to incorporate as wide and inclusive data as possible (Denscombe, 1998: p.7). The main characteristics of this research design are collecting information “1) from a group of people in order to *describe* characteristics such as attitudes, opinions, beliefs, aptitudes, abilities, or knowledge; 2) by *asking questions* in which the responses or answers to those questions constitute the data of the survey; 3) from a *sample* rather than every member of the population” (Fraenkel and Wallen 2003: p.396.).

2.2. Qualitative Research

Qualitative research is characterized by the collection and analysis of textual data (surveys, interviews, focus groups, conversational analysis, observation, ethnographies (Olds et al., 2005)), and by its emphasis on the context within which the study occurs. In qualitative research, to promote the qualified explanation of the qualitative data it requires comprehensive descriptions of this data related to the context. Numbers can also be used to present the data in a brief illustrative description, but thick description is important to answer the questions through rich and contextual reports.

Several texts provide descriptions and examples of qualitative research in the social sciences (Creswell, 2007; Denzin and Lincoln, 2005; Merriam, 2002; Patton, 2002), and two recent publications describe the conduct of qualitative research within the context of engineering (Chism, Douglas, and Hilson Jr., 2008; Koro-Ljungberg and Douglas, 2008).

2.2.1. Grounded Theory Designs

Grounded theory research is a qualitative approach to generating and developing a theory from the data the researcher collect in a research study (Scott and Morrison, 2006). Strauss and Corbin (1994) defines grounded theory as “ a general methodology for developing theory that is grounded in data systematically gathered and analyzed”(p.273). They (1990) point out the inductive nature of grounded theory research by stating that “ One does not begin with a theory, then prove it. Rather, one begins with an area of study and what is relevant to that area is allowed to emerge”(p.23).

2.2.2. Ethnographic Designs

Ethnographic designs are qualitative procedures for describing, analyzing, and interpreting a cultural group's shared patterns of behavior, beliefs, and language that develop over time (Creswell, 2005;p.436). In this research design, the detailed description of the culture-sharing group within its own context is provided through the display of the patterns the group shares by exploring the issues with interview, observation, and collecting documents on this group.

2.2.3. Narrative Research Designs

Narrative research designs are qualitative procedures in which researchers describe the lives of individuals, collect and tell stories about these individuals' lives, and write narratives about their experiences (Creswell, 2005;p.53).

2.2.4. Phenomenology

Phenomenology refers to the description of one or more individuals' consciousness and experience of a phenomenon such as the death of a loved one, viewing oneself as a teacher, the act of teaching, the experience of being a minority group member, or the experience of a winning a soccer game (Johnson and Christensen, 2000;p.364).

2.3. Mixed Methods

Mixed methods has been described as the "third methodological movement" (following quantitatively and qualitatively oriented approaches) (Teddlie and Tashakkori, 2003). Different descriptions of mixed methods have been identified in the established academic platforms. However, these descriptions have been generally criticized by scholars for being too divisive by artificially emphasizing differences specifically. Because, it is strictly stated that quantitative and qualitative paradigms "cannot and should not be mixed" (Johnson and Onwuegbuzie, 2004, p. 14). Instead, they are proponents of pragmatism, in which "what is most fundamental is the research question- research methods should follow research questions in a way that offers the best chance to obtain useful answers" (Johnson and Onwuegbuzie, 2004, pp. 16-17). Creswell et al. define a mixed methods study as follows:

A mixed methods study involves the collection or analysis of both quantitative and/or qualitative data in a single study in which the data are collected concurrently or sequentially, are given a priority, and involve the integration of the data at one or more stages in the process of research (Creswell et al., 2003, p. 212).

In the research literature, on the basis of the followed procedures and the use of quantitative and qualitative research components, four basic mixed method designs are identified.

2.3.1. Triangulation Designs □

The term triangulation in research was first used by Denzin (1978) to describe bringing together complementary methods or data sources to offset weaknesses in each. Data are collected concurrently in one phase, and interpretation involves comparing the results of each to best understand the research question (Morse, 1991). □

2.3.2. Embedded Designs □

Embedded designs are not distinguished by the concurrent or sequential nature of data collection (either is allowed) (Creswell and Clark, 2007). Rather, one type of data takes a supplemental role to the other. According to Creswell and Clark (2007), a study is embedded if the secondary data are not useful or meaningful without the primary study.

2.3.3. Explanatory Designs □

Explanatory mixed methods designs are characterized by an initial and extensive quantitative phase built upon by a subsequent qualitative phase. Usually, the qualitative results serve to explain the quantitative results. Integration occurs between phases, as the quantitative results often inform the questions or sampling in the second phase (Creswell et al., 2003).

2.3.4. Exploratory Designs

Exploratory designs begin with a primary qualitative phase, then the findings are validated or otherwise informed by quantitative results. This approach is usually employed to develop a standardized (quantitative) instrument in a relatively unstudied area. The qualitative phase identifies important factors, while the quantitative phase applies them to a larger and/or more diverse sample. (Creswell and Plano Clark, 2007)

2. Methodology

2.1. Corpus

The data consist, in part, of 200 research articles published in two indexed online journals, which are specifically well-known with genre-oriented researches in various academic disciplines, *English for Specific Purposes* and *English for Academic Purposes*, between the years, 2008-2013. As concerns reputation, lastly, these journals are two ones of international repute appealing to scholars, academicians, and researchers across and within disciplines, among borders, by presenting theoretical and empirical research on ESP genre systems and pedagogy, and more importantly, giving voice to several discourse communities through the presentation of rhetorical realisations in the genres performed in these communities and the socio-rhetorical and socio-cultural reflections of their contexts in these devices.

2.2. Analysis of Corpus

This study draws on content analysis, a technique which “allows a quantitative analysis of seemingly qualitative data” (Smith, Heady, Hamilton and Philips; 1996), of the articles published in EAP and ESP journals between 2008-2013. The main rationale for conducting this analysis lays in the fact that it provides the examination of “latent or inferred meanings of the communication under study, which may lead to the development of constructs or theories based on the researchers’ knowledge and evidence drawn from the study” (Berg, 1998) and “ultimately this systematic and thorough evaluation allows for conclusions to be drawn about such factors as the presence or absence of particular ideas, theories, or biases; the extent of coverage of specified topics; contradictions; or myths, to name but few applications” (Kondracki, Wellman, and Amundson, 2002; p.224).

The process consists of coding the research design employed in research articles according to the occurrence frequency under relevant content. Descriptive statistics are conducted through frequency analysis and percentile ranks, and illustrated in frequency/percentage tables.

3. Results and Discussion

The following discussion will explore the trend genres in the last five-year of ESP genre tradition and the frequency of research designs in turn. At first, research methods employed in studies are demonstrated in the tables according to the range from the most frequently examined to the least. Thus, the field last-five year period is added with the involvement of knowledge on which research designs are the leading ones of the research territory and what is/are the major aspect/aspects commonly pointed by researchers. Besides, this tendency is discussed depending on the logic behind such presence variation from inter and intra-contextual extents which function as the main significatives of the ESP inquiry direction.

3.1. The frequency of research methods according to the number of articles

Table 3.1 shows the frequencies of articles in which a specific genre is examined between 2008-2013. As can be seen, there is a significant difference among genres in terms of the study frequency according to the number of articles in which they are involved.

Table 4.2. Frequencies of Research Designs employed in research articles between 2008-2013

Research Designs	Number of Articles	
Qualitative Research Design	124	
	Ethnographic Research Design	124
Percentage	62	
Quantitative Research Design	67	
	Survey Designs	67
Percentage	33,5	
Mixed Research Design	9	
	Explanatory Designs	9
Percentage	4,5	
Total	200	

As it is demonstrated in table 3.1, the most frequently applied research design of ESP genre tradition is qualitative research design, which is actually commonly employed design in context-dependent fields and seen as the primary source of investigation by scholars in international platforms to explain contextual factors, with 124 cases in 200 articles and, following this research design, quantitative research designs which are the means in which researchers apply to numerical data to explore or explain phenomena, is the second one with highest frequency in the number of research articles in which they have been followed (67 cases in 200 research papers).

At this point, it is possible to indicate that qualitative research design may seem the trend one of ESP research tradition with the application of ethnographic designs, because, as this design is the descriptive of cultural and social structures of a discourse community, it seems that it has been commonly used in the last five year of ESP research as they were in the past. As for the second design, quantitative research method, which has been frequently performed in this field, it is seen that researchers mostly prefer to employ survey designs within this method to describe trends in a large population of individuals.

This design appears in 67 research articles, and, according to this result, it is possible to say that to explore the tendencies and ideas of specific communities interested in some certain parts of ESP field, researchers seem to follow this research design, so they have been widely used.

As for mixed-method research designs, as it is illustrated in table.3.1, the occurrence is rather rare, and only explanatory design was used in research articles with 9 cases for the data collection and analysis procedure, which shows that researchers tend quite less to apply mixed-methods in the searching process though this design may play important roles in the more accurate clarification of the phenomenon in a specific group with the integration of both qualitative and quantitative data.

Thus, the last five year of ESP literature shows a striking tendency in the use of qualitative research methods to collect and analyze the data compared to the quantitative and mixed methods. Generally, although the results are based on a small corpus, it becomes clear that qualitative research design with the proportion of %62 seems the main material of the searching process of ESP genre research tradition compared to quantitative one with %33,5 percentage rate and mixed method with %4,5.

4. Conclusion

This paper, through the medium of a content analysis conducted on the articles published in two indexed online journals - English for Specific Purposes and English for Academic Purposes- during a five-year period (2008-2013) especially for this academic territory, documents the prevalence degree of the methods adopted by the researchers in the field and the context-specific drives which promote the tendency in the employment mode of the designs. In general, the study shows that scholars and researchers involved in the field principally tend to employ on qualitative research designs in their studies rather than qualitative and mixed-research designs.

The content analysis has revealed that articles are intensively dependent on the use of ethnographic research designs with such a higher frequency rate, 124 cases in 200 research articles, which actually forms approximately %65 of the total proportion. However, it is important to state that, in corpus, there are also some other studies, though they do not share so high rate that qualitative ones have, which have covered quantitative studies with a moderate frequency number. For example, it seems that surveys are those ones, which seem to force to be the trend research methods among others.

At this point, it is important to indicate that the frequency manipulation is commonly carried between articles, the focal designs of which are ethnographic designs, and so, survey designs and explanatory designs seem abstaining part of the field. However, the effort of the researchers and scholars to apply these methods to explore and explain the context specific factors from different dimensions by pointing out the need in the field are clearly seen in the last five-year research background of ESP.

This study contributes to the literature by expanding knowledge on the content arrangement of the RAs of an academic contexts and workplace/professional settings, which should/may be explored and explained for deeper understanding what has been done in the field in the last five year which actually is the uncharted side of ESP. In general, though this study is a limited one with an average size of corpora and needs replicating for more valid and reliable results with a larger corpus and different techniques, it is believed that, besides it serves as a good guidance for both scholars and researchers by broadening their perspectives with a different dimension. At this point, the field would still recall further and comprehensive investigation on the research designs and data collection tools to provide more detailed descriptive data in terms of contextual factors effecting the researchers to follow certain research methodology and the identification of the extent to which the nature of the field canalizes the process.

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