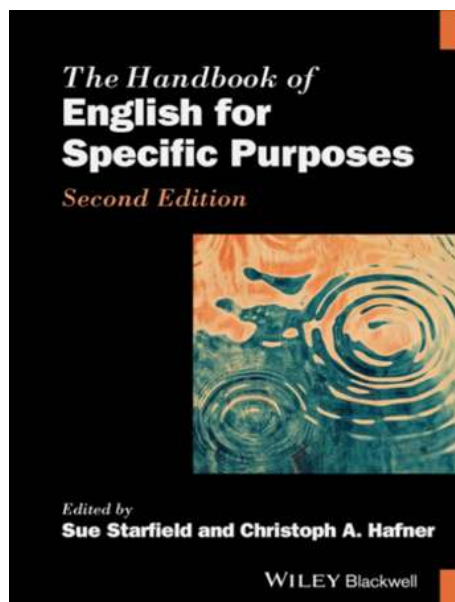


BOOK REVIEW



RETHINKING ESP: CRITICAL DIRECTIONS FOR A SECOND EDITION

Sue Starfield and Christoph A. Hafner (Eds.). THE HANDBOOK OF ENGLISH FOR SPECIFIC PURPOSES, 2nd ed. (2025), Wiley-Blackwell. 704 pp., ISBN 978-1-119-98500-6 (HBK); 978-1-119-98505-1 (EPUB).

English for Specific Purposes (ESP) is arguably the most vibrant and interdisciplinary area within applied linguistics. It brings together diverse research traditions, pedagogical practices, and real-world applications. Since its inception in the 1960s, it has been valued for its responsiveness to the evolving demands of academic, professional, and occupational communication. Over the decades, ESP has continued to grow, shaped by global, technological, and sociopolitical changes and by the shifting needs of the community of stakeholders it serves. Within this dynamic landscape, the second edition of *The handbook of English for specific purposes*, coedited by Sue Starfield and Christoph Hafner, offers a timely and ambitious rethinking of the field's current profile and possible futures. It arrives more than a decade after the first edition, co-edited by Paltridge and Starfield, which was published in 2013. It also builds on its legacy while reorienting the field toward more critical, reflexive, and globally responsive engagements. The second edition, rather than consolidating ESP as a fixed body of knowledge, embraces its tensions, evolutions, and future directions.

This volume speaks to a wide readership, including researchers, practitioners, and both graduate and undergraduate students engaged in ESP across academic, professional, and pedagogical contexts because it spans applied linguistics, teacher education, curriculum development, and disciplinary communication. Researchers will find comprehensive reviews and theoretical insights, with most chapters identifying future research directions. For practitioners and teacher-researchers,

the volume offers empirically-grounded discussions of pedagogy, genre-based instruction, and curriculum design. It also serves as a valuable reference for graduate students, offering both conceptual clarity and methodological guidance. The inclusive structure, critical orientation, and focus on real-world applications make the volume broadly relevant across the ESP community.

The collection opens with a historiographic, stand-alone chapter (Chapter 1) by renowned professor Vijay K. Bhatia, who situates ESP in relation to its shifting theoretical roots. The author traces the field from register analysis to genre-based, ethnographic, and socio-rhetorical approaches. Bhatia's account is broader and more critical than the historical overview by Ann Johns in the first edition, and it perhaps signals the editors' intention to frame ESP as an interdisciplinary, problem-oriented, and socially engaged domain. The remaining 32 chapters are organized into four parts: ESP and Language Skills (Chapters 2–6), ESP and Pedagogy (Chapters 7–12), Areas of ESP Research (Chapters 13–23), and Research Perspectives and Methodologies in ESP Research (Chapters 24–33).

Part I addresses core ESP competencies, speaking, listening, reading, writing, and vocabulary, situating them within multilingual, multimodal, and professional settings. Feak and Chan (Chapter 2) analyze spoken genres in academic and workplace discourse. Goh and Lee (Chapter 3) reconceptualize listening as a socially embedded and cognitively demanding skill, requiring new pedagogical approaches. Hirvela in Chapter 4 charts the development of ESP reading research and emphasizes its alignment with digital and multiliteracies frameworks. Chapter 5, authored by Hyland, is perhaps a tour de force of ESP writing research and pedagogy. Hyland weaves together theory, empirical insight, and classroom application to present writing as a form of situated social action. While maintaining an applied orientation, the author also acknowledges identity, criticality, and multimodal fluency as integral to writing instruction. This chapter complements his theoretical overview in earlier editions by grounding ESP writing theory in the material realities of teaching and learning. In Chapter 6, Coxhead extends this discussion by foregrounding vocabulary as the lexical foundation of ESP competence. Drawing on corpus-based research, the author shows how tools such as the *Academic Word List* and specialized domain lists can inform teaching and materials design. Emphasizing evidence-based pedagogy, Coxhead advocates explicit instruction through authentic texts and collocations while fostering learner autonomy in vocabulary learning.

Part II turns to the theoretical and practical foundations of ESP instruction. In Chapter 7, Lynne Flowerdew revisits needs analysis, challenging us to consider whose needs are prioritized and how these priorities are shaped by digitalization and institutional pressures. Cheng, in Chapter 8, argues for ethnographic and adaptable genre pedagogies that keep pace with digital genres and the changing identities of learners. Pecorari and Malmström (Chapter 9) explore how ESP and English Medium Instruction (EMI) are increasingly overlapping, making a case for cross-disciplinary teaching approaches. Douglas (Chapter 10) updates his earlier

work on assessment. The author advocates for models that are authentic and specific to the domains learners engage with in real life. In Chapter 11, Harwood offers a sharp critique of commercial ESP materials, calling for a stronger role for teachers in developing resources that respond to local needs. The author reviews empirical studies that show a persistent mismatch between textbook content and authentic discourse, whether in academic lectures, business meetings, or specialist vocabulary. Basturkmen, in Chapter 12, explores the complex, variable, and underresearched field of ESP teacher development. The author highlights the importance of a context-aware approach to ESP teacher development, connecting teacher identity with collaboration and subject knowledge.

Part III turns to English for Academic Purposes (EAP), presenting it as a daughter discipline, emerging from ESP yet evolving into a distinct branch in its own right. Charles, in Chapter 13, traces the evolution of EAP, emphasizing its growing concern with interdisciplinarity and social justice. In Chapter 14, Parkinson reflects on how scientific ideology leaves its rhetorical mark on English for Science and Technology (EST). In Chapter 15, Marra brings sociocultural dynamics to the forefront in workplace discourse, while Zhang, in Chapter 16, challenges narrow views of Business English and argues for a broader understanding of professional communication. Chapters 17, 18 and 19, authored respectively by Northcott, Ferguson, and Bosher, focus on legal, medical, and nursing English. Each foregrounds the tension between institutional expectations and the multilingual realities of professional communication. In Chapter 20, Friginal offers a richly detailed study of call center discourse, combining corpus linguistics with ethnographic insights. In Chapter 21, Thompson addresses thesis and dissertation writing as academic genres shaped by disciplinary, institutional, and cultural conventions. The author traces recent trends such as article-based and coauthored dissertations, noting that theses differ from journal articles in scope, audience, and rhetorical function. Thompson highlights how doctoral writing serves as a site of academic socialization, arguing for pedagogical models that support genre mastery while enabling authorial development. One of the volume's most compelling contributions is John Flowerdew's Chapter 22 on English for Research Publication Purposes (ERPP). The author examines how the global dominance of English simultaneously enables and constrains academic publishing. Flowerdew introduces a center-periphery-semi-periphery framework to highlight the structural disadvantages faced by English as an Additional Language (EAL) researchers, especially those working "off the grid" of established academic networks, without access to key resources or mentorship. These concerns resonate with regional studies such as Abdeljaoued and Labassi (2020), who document how Tunisian scholars navigate a publishing environment marked by linguistic inequities, weak institutional support, and ideological tensions surrounding English as the *de facto* lingua franca of academia. In Chapter 23, Pérez-Llantada shows how the Open Science movement has produced new digital genres that promote transparency and collaboration. The author highlights the growing multimodality and hypertextuality

of ESP communication, where diverse semiotic modes engage wider audiences. The chapter calls for developing digital and multimodal literacies as essential to ESP's adaptation to contemporary academic and professional contexts.

Part IV closes the volume by mapping the field's emerging theoretical and methodological directions, reflecting the pluralistic and interdisciplinary nature of ESP. In Chapter 24, Nesi's contribution is particularly noteworthy for its clear distinction between corpus-based and corpus-driven approaches, and for its emphasis on the value of small, purpose-built corpora in domain-specific research. The chapter offers accessible, practitioner-oriented insights and directs readers toward a range of useful tools and resources. In Chapter 25, Rozycki and Connor revisit the role of intercultural rhetoric in ESP writing, while Nickerson (Chapter 26) considers how English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) can inform ESP pedagogy. A critical shift in the field is evident in the studies by Fang and Baker (Chapter 27), Starfield (Chapter 28), and Kubota (Chapter 29), who respectively engage with decolonial theory, the ethics of plagiarism and equitable access to academic and professional discourses, and the intersecting politics of race and gender in ESP contexts. Chapter 30, by Darvin and Zhang, conceptualizes identity in ESP as fluid and discursively constructed, shaped by broader global hierarchies and institutional ideologies. Dressen-Hammouda (Chapter 31) develops a robust framework for ethnographic ESP research, foregrounding the social, cultural, and contextual dimensions of specialized communication. Hafner (Chapter 32) extends this perspective by demonstrating how multimodality enriches genre analysis, illustrating the complex interplay of visual, verbal, and embodied modes in professional discourse. In Chapter 33, Belcher projects ESP into the digital future, examining how artificial intelligence (AI), multimodal communication, and new media genres like TED Talks and 3MT presentations reshape participation and literacy practices. These last three chapters mark a major methodological broadening from the 2013 edition, thus reflecting the field's growing critical reflexivity and interdisciplinary scope in response to evolving communicative ecologies.

This volume builds on the intellectual foundation of the first edition (Paltridge & Starfield, 2013) but significantly reorients the field in response to global, digital, and sociopolitical transformations. The 2013 volume was widely praised as a landmark publication. Paltridge and Starfield (2013) described their volume as (then) "a state-of-the-art survey of research in ESP" (p. 1). Isani (2013) described it as rigorous and accessible across key ESP domains, while Babić (2013) called it "much more than a handbook" (p. 139). She noted its multidimensional treatment of pedagogy, research, and practice, and its usefulness in graduate and postgraduate education. The 2025 edition honors this legacy but pushes the field further, amplifying its critical depth and global responsiveness. While the first edition was structured into six sections reflecting traditional concerns, language skills, disciplinary domains, pedagogy, and methodologies, the second adopts a more thematically integrated and critically inflected design.

Notably, the edition places a far stronger emphasis on issues of identity, power, and access, a leitmotif that runs through multiple chapters, particularly in Part IV. This reflects a maturation of the *critical turn* identified in the earlier volume, where Starfield's (2013) chapter on critical perspectives appeared more as an emerging voice than a central organizing principle. In the second edition, however, criticality is not confined to one chapter but distributed across discussions of assessment, gender and race, identity, and digital multimodality. It explicitly addresses ideological assumptions in ESP pedagogies, the marginalization of multilingual scholars, and the decolonial challenges posed by global Englishes. Such developments mark a significant deepening of the field's theoretical and ethical reflexivity.

Another area of marked evolution is the treatment of technology and digital genres. While the first edition offered foundational discussions of corpus tools and emerging digital practices, the 2025 edition reflects a broader and more sophisticated understanding of multimodality, digital genre ecologies, and AI-mediated communication. Hafner's and Pérez-Llantada's chapters, for instance, respond to the rapidly shifting terrain of digital communication in academia and the workplace, positioning ESP not only as reactive but as methodologically equipped to engage with these complexities.

However, the second edition is not without limitations. Despite its commendable breadth and reflexivity, the volume remains largely dominated by contributors from English-dominant contexts, repeating a pattern noted by Isani (2013) in her review of the first edition. While some chapters do engage with linguistically exogenous settings and transnational populations (e.g., in studies on resettlement or global publication practices), the majority of empirical work continues to reflect Anglophone academic and institutional perspectives. This risks re-inscribing certain central-periphery dynamics that critical ESP itself seeks to contest. The editors' intention to maintain accessibility to a wide readership is evident, yet the engagement with non-Western epistemologies or South-South perspectives remains uneven. While contributors such as Zuocheng Zhang, Yue Zhang and Bosher extend the geographical and institutional range, voices from underrepresented regions and vocational sectors remain limited. The volume leans heavily on Inner Circle perspectives, with little engagement with South-South or non-Western epistemologies.

The second edition is perhaps a more layered, interdisciplinary, and self-reflexive vision of ESP. While the first edition sought to codify the field through core concepts and established practices, the current volume embraces internal tensions, hybrid domains, and methodological pluralism. Its forward-looking stance is evident in the "future directions" sections of nearly every chapter. This signals a shift from authoritative synthesis to inquiry-driven engagement. In this sense, the volume functions less as a traditional handbook and more as a critical companion, ideal for researchers and advanced students navigating the evolving terrain of ESP. The book offers a panoramic yet incisive re-engagement with the field, marked by

intellectual breadth, thematic coherence, and critical depth. Its systematic coverage of language skills, pedagogical tools, disciplinary domains, and research perspectives provides a solid foundation. What sets this edition apart from a mere compendium is its embrace of complexity, linguistic, sociopolitical, and methodological dimensions, and its call for a more reflexive, justice-oriented ESP attuned to shifting global communicative realities.

One of the volume's most significant contributions is its refusal to reify ESP domains. Rather than treating academic and professional English as fixed categories, the chapters unsettle boundaries between EAP and EMI, native and non-native norms, and classroom and workplace practices. In an era of hybrid genres, platformed interaction, and mobile identities, static mappings of discourse communities no longer suffice. Several chapters take up this challenge with theoretical rigor and methodological creativity, for instance, Hafner's analysis of multimodal genre systems and Friginal's work on call center discourse, demonstrating ESP's ability to capture communicative dynamism while offering pedagogical insight. Crucially, the volume foregrounds ideological critique and epistemic plurality. Issues of race, gender, linguistic inequality, and knowledge access, long marginal in ESP, are given sustained attention. Kubota's chapter on gender and race, Starfield's critique of plagiarism and authorship, and Flowerdew's examination of research publication inequities anchor the volume within critical applied linguistics. These concerns are not treated as peripheral but integrated as central to ESP's ethical and political project.

In conclusion, while the first edition sought to define and consolidate ESP, the second embraces its internal tensions and its evolving relevance in an unequal, multilingual, and digitized world. Its structure supports accessibility, but its intellectual ambition is clear: to reposition ESP not merely as an applied subfield, but as a space of critical inquiry and social responsibility. The volume's attention to identity, access, technology, and criticality marks a generational shift. This handbook does not merely reflect the current state of the field; it challenges its assumptions, redefines its boundaries, and charts new directions for research and practice.

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