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## | RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Methodological Approaches in English for Specific Purposes: An Exploratory Systematic Review of Research Trends

Sanaa Charef<sup>1</sup> and Tarik Bouguerba<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>*Ibn Tofail University, Kenitra, Morocco*

<sup>2</sup>*Associate Professor, Ibn Tofail University, Kenitra, Morocco*

**Corresponding Author:** Sanaa Charef, **E-mail:** [sanaa.charef@uit.ac.ma](mailto:sanaa.charef@uit.ac.ma)

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## | ABSTRACT

This exploratory study examined the methodological approaches employed in research in the field of English for Specific Purposes. This study synthesizes 23 studies published across diverse educational and professional contexts between 2011 and 2024. The analysis was based on four categories: research design, data collection method, sample details, and analysis tools and techniques to highlight prevalent trends. The findings reveal that reliance on mixed-methods design is significant, with quantitative approaches frequently used in studies that include statistical analyses. Qualitative approaches are also used for thematic and narrative analyses or descriptions to interpret learner experiences and perceptions. This study identified underexplored areas for future research, such as longitudinal studies and integration of technology.

## | KEYWORDS

English for specific purposes, systematic review, methodology, method

## | ARTICLE INFORMATION

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## 1. Introduction

Research in the field of English for Specific Purposes (ESP) has grown significantly over the past decade, emphasizing the need for specific language skills in diverse professional and academic environments. The linguistic and communicative needs of learners from diverse backgrounds and statuses range from university students to vocational students and even from different professions. This study is important because a systematic understanding of the methodologies used in these studies will help enhance pedagogical practices and make them more relevant to evolving academic and professional requirements.

### 1.1 Research objectives

The objectives of this study were as follows:

1. To identify the prevalent methodologies used in ESP studies.
2. To identify the common methods used in ESP studies.

### 1.2 Research questions

The research questions of this study were as follows:

1. What are the most prevalent methodologies used in ESP studies?
2. What are the commonly used methods in ESP studies?

## 2. Literature review

Research in the field of English for Specific Purposes (ESP) has grown significantly over the past few decades, due to the increasing need for specialized communication skills in professional and academic settings. ESP, which includes disciplines such

as Business English, legal English, and medical English, focuses on language teaching that is specific and tailored to a specific domain that includes specific vocabulary, discourse, and communicative functions relevant to each field.

ESP has also witnessed a surge in research, driven by the need to satisfy the growing demand for students and professionals in international business. Most studies in this field have focused on enhancing communication skills in workplace settings, including negotiations, presentations, and business writing (Davies & Swan, 1998). Initially, case studies and observational research were used to examine language use in real-world business contexts. Recently, however, studies have begun to rely more on digital tools and technology-driven methods, such as e-learning platforms (Godwin-Jones, 2003).

Moreover, a trend has emerged in the methodology adopted in this field of research, which is a mixed-methods design that combines both qualitative and quantitative data. This approach provides researchers the opportunity to triangulate data from several sources to increase the validity and credibility of their findings (Creswell, 2014). In addition, corpus and discourse analyses have also been used in recent years to examine authentic language use in business environments, which helps in the development of ESP materials that are more effective (Bhatia, 2004).

### 3. Methodology

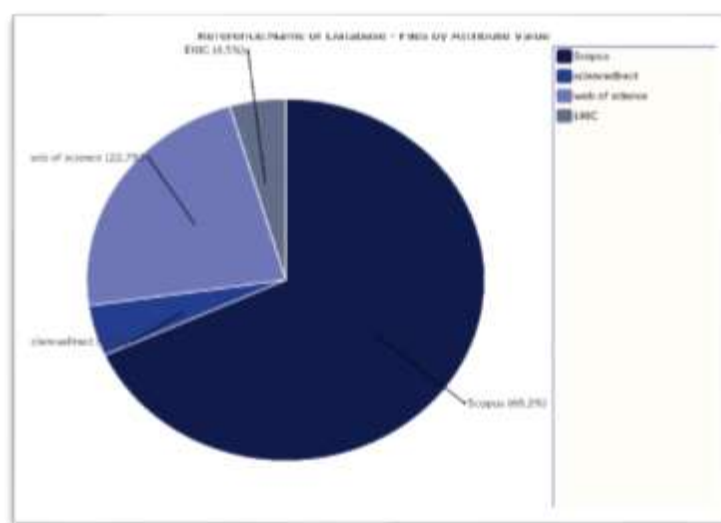
This study was based on an exploratory systematic review of the methodological approaches used in English for Specific Purposes (ESP) research. The objective was to identify trends and gaps in the current literature. The PRISMA 2020 checklist was used as a framework, and a four-phase flow diagram was used. The articles were assessed using this methodology to address two research questions. The four phases of the PRISMA methodology are identification, screening, eligibility, and inclusion.

#### 3.1 Identification phase:

The search was based on five specific criteria for identifying and selecting articles. First, the researcher used the ScienceDirect, SCOPUS, Web of Science, and ERIC databases, which are all relevant and accessible. The selected articles were published between 2011 and 2024 and were written in English. Moreover, only research articles were included and full open-access availability was required. Table 1 outlines the criteria used for the article selection process.

**Table 1.** Table shows the inclusion and exclusion criteria used in choosing articles

Criteria	Inclusion	Exclusion
Database	ScienceDirect, SCOPUS, ERIC, and Web of Science	All other databases
Publication year	2011-2024	Other years
Language	English	Other languages
Document type	Research article	Book, book chapter, review paper, proceedings
Access to full article	Open access	Limited & no access



**Figure 1.** Articles based on Database.

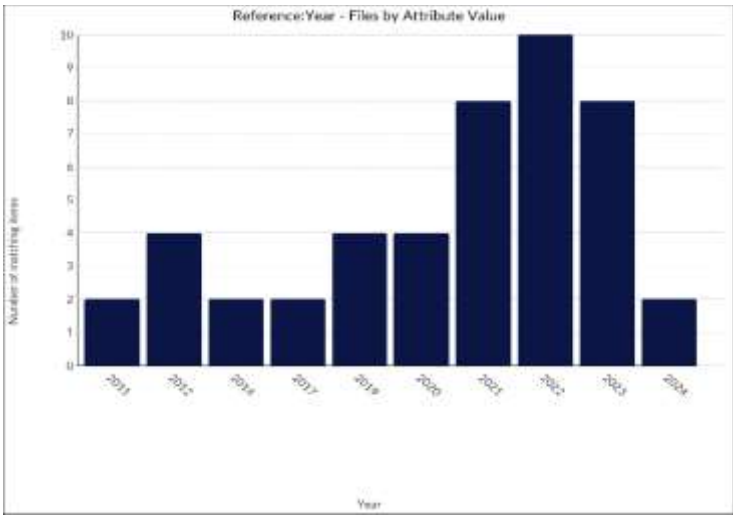


Figure 2. Articles based on Year.

In addition, articles were determined using several search strings and keywords. Each string was used in all four databases to identify relevant articles related to English for Specific Purposes and Business English teaching and learning.

Table 2. The search strings used in all four databases to find relevant articles

Search strings		
English for specific purposes	AND	ESP
ESP	AND	English for specific purposes

Articles that met the inclusion and exclusion criteria were gathered and compiled based on the criteria in Table 1 and the search strings used in Table 2.

3.2 The screening phase:

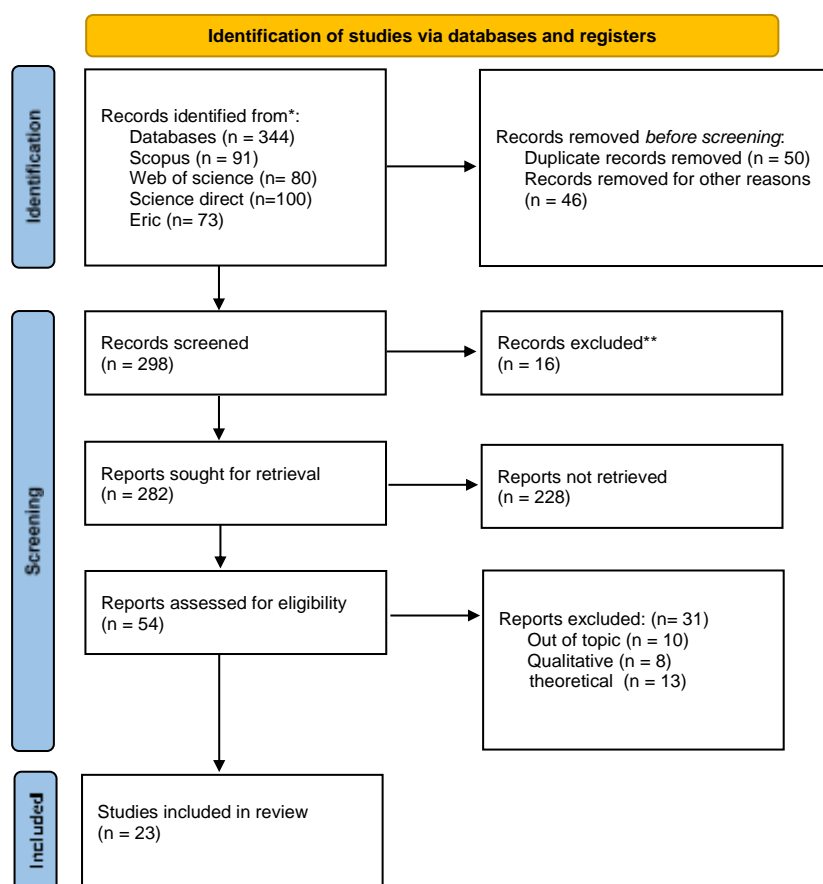
In this phase, the articles underwent additional screening based on their titles to ensure that they were in accordance with the keywords. The abstracts were reviewed to confirm compliance.

3.3 The eligibility phase:

In this phase, the articles were further scrutinized to ensure that they were aligned with the inclusion and exclusion criteria before proceeding to the final stage.

3.4 The inclusion phase:

All articles that met the criteria were selected for further analysis within this study, while those that did not meet the criteria were excluded. All previously mentioned phases of the PRISMA 2020 flowchart are clearly defined in figure 1.



**Figure 3.** The flowchart of the article screening and selection process

After completion of all four phases, a total of 23 articles were retained. These articles included research papers that used a variety of methodologies, including qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods, with the exception of one article. Table 3 provides a detailed account of the methods used in the articles selected for this study.

**Table 3.** The number of articles based on the research methodology used.

Research Methodology	Number of articles
Qualitative	2
Quantitative	7
Mixed-method	13
Multi method approach	1

#### 4. Findings and discussion

The researcher gathered, examined, and organized 23 articles for this study. All the articles were sourced from 2011 to 2024. This selection aimed to validate the relevance of the study and highlight the current trends. This helped the researcher in her attempt to answer the research questions.

**Table 4.** The details of each article: research design, sample size, data collection process, and data analysis techniques.

Titles	Analysis techniques	Data collection method	Research design	Sample details
1 : Active subtitling in the classroom a case study of an educational intervention Imported Notes	statistical analysis, descriptive analysis, qualitative analysis and comparative analysis	pre-test and posttest, interviews and observational data	Quantitative, a comparative analysis between an experimental group and a control group.	82 students from different engineering and architecture degrees.

2 : An Empirical Study of ESP Learners' Experiences Using Edmodo in a Virtual Community of Practice Imported Notes	statistical analysis, thematic analysis and SPSS software	Questionnaire and focus group discussion	The research design used in the study is a mixed-method research approach, specifically employing a sequential explanatory design.	The participants in this study comprised 30 undergraduates learning Business English course with 11 male and 19 female students.
3 : An Interdisciplinary Module to teach English and Business Organization in a University-Level Vocational Course Imported Notes	Kirkpatrick's Four-Level Evaluation Model	oral examination and informal interviews	the study used primarily qualitative research design	The sample consisted of first-year undergraduate students in the Gastronomic Sciences degree program at the University of Messina, Italy.
4 : Challenges and opportunities of English as the medium of instruction in diploma midwifery programs in Bangladesh~ a mixed-methods study Imported Notes	Survey data were entered into a master Excel file and grouped descriptively to highlight trends and outliers, and Key informant interviews were summarized in a standard notes format using Word	interviews and surveys	a mixed-methods study	38 public midwifery education institutions, and 14 English instructors
5 : Commentary on Louhiala-Salminen et al. (2005) ~ Launching the notion of BELF		a survey and interviews on intercultural communication and meeting and email data	a mixed-methods approach	Finns and Swedes in two Nordic corporate mergers
7 : DEVELOPMENT OF PROSPECTIVE AGRICULTURAL ENGINEERS' TECHNICAL WRITING SKILLS USING ONLINE WRITING LAB	The Pearson criterion was used to process the results	Quantitative methods such as an experiment and a survey were used. The qualitative method was used to collect and analyze quantitative data	a mixed research design was employed	58 Masters of Podillia State University
8 : Digital storytelling in ESP~ Towards a new literacy in hybrid language learning	a mixed-method approach was used with quantitative (numerical) as well as qualitative (students' answers) data.	using a questionnaire to collect the necessary data for our research.	an exploratory survey research design	25 students from the Financial Translation class at the University of Alcalá
9 : English for specific purposes E-learning experimental research	Results of pre-tests and post-tests were processed into tables and assessed by means of statistical methods	the students wrote the pre-test and at the end the post-test.	experimental research	The research sample is represented by 107 students enrolled into the optional subject of Business English
10 : ESP and Business English for Postgraduate Students in the Department of Economics, Tahri Mohamed University, Bechar, Algeria	The data collected was analyzed quantitatively and qualitatively	questionnaire and a semi structured interview given to the teacher	a mixed-method	eighteen first year doctorate students at Tahri Mohamed university, Bechar, Algeria

11 : Global Business Textbook Evaluation~ Task Types in the Spotlight	The Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) release 21 was used to analyze the survey data	two most popular global business textbook series currently taught in Iranian ELT institutes	Quantitative	
12 : Improving Oral Production Skills in the Business English Class Through Creative Dubbing	statistical analysis	pre- and post-language tests and questionnaires filled in by students	a mixed methods study	twenty students from the Degree in Commerce
13 : Main approaches of business English teaching to future lawyers~ A case study of Ukrainian higher institutions	Kappa Online Calculator (n./d.)	surveys and questionnaire	a mixed-method approach	fifty-three teachers of English from Ukrainian legal higher institutions and 98 first-year students and cadets studying in the Academy of the State Penitentiary Service
14 : Reverse Subtitling in the ESP Class to Improve Written Skills in English~ A Case Study	the independent sample T-test and the one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA)	students were asked to submit two compositions in English and questionnaire	The mixed method	50 undergraduates from the second course of the Degree in Commerce
15 : Students' Perceptions and Challenges in Learning Business English~ Understanding Students' Needs and Job Market Requirements	the questionnaire was analyzed using descriptive statistics and subsequently triangulated with the interview data through thematic analysis	16-item close-ended questionnaire, followed by interviews with some students.	an exploratory, mixed-methods study	120 senior undergraduate students
16 : Students' attitudes towards the use of Slovene as L1 in teaching and learning of business English at tertiary level	Statistical analysis was performed using SPSS software (version 21).	data gathered via a questionnaire.	The present study was quantitative,	The total number of students taking part in this study was 174
17 : Study results and questionnaire survey of students in the lessons of business English E-learning course in comparison with face-to-face teaching	Results of pretests and posttests were processed into tables and analyzed using the non-parametrical statistical tests. Wilcoxon pair test was used and Mann-Whitney test was used. Statistical programme Statistica 10 was used for the calculation	pretests, posttests and questionnaire	Quantitative	two groups of students studying Business English
18 : Success in English Medium Instruction in China~ significant indicators and implications	Questionnaire data was analysed in R. Descriptive statistics were generated for all variables. Interview data was then analysed in NVivo	Questionnaire, exam score (n=100), and semi-structured interview data (n=29)	This article reports a mixed-methods study	106 sophomore university students (Year 2) majoring in Business Management volunteered to take part in this study.

19 : Teaching business English to future economists using a multimedia textbook	Covariance-based Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) software as SPSS AMOS and Textalyzer were used to process the students' responses to survey questions.	The questionnaire on preferences in learning and Students' Needs Analysis Questionnaire used closed-ended and semi-closed-ended questions	A multi method approach was used, empirical and statistical methods were used	108 people
20 : The efficacy of MALL instruction in business English learning	data was evaluated descriptively by coding means and the percentages of the replies from the students	a questionnaire	Quantitative	21 participants
21 : The Gap between Perceived and Achieved English Communication Needs of Saudi Management and Business Administration Students~ An ESP Paradigm	Qualitative method is used to make meaning of the quantitative data to present an analytical narrative of the findings	Quantitative data were collected through a survey questionnaire	The study was conducted using mixed methods	A total of 111 students participated in the survey.
22 : Use of cloud technologies in the process of professional and linguistic training of law students for the development of academic performance	IBM SPSS Statistics 25.0.0.1 software was used to analyse the quantitative data. Two-tailed P-value and Student's t test were calculated for statistical processing of experimental data.	tests, questionnaires for students and teachers and focus group survey	Quantitative	This study involved 372 students of the first and third years of study of Specialty 081: Law and 14 lecturers of higher educational institutions
23 : Using business negotiation simulation with China's English-major undergraduates for practice ability development	statistical and thematic analysis	using online surveys and written document analyses	This study integrated the quantitative and qualitative research paradigms	77 English-major participants

Table 4 provides a detailed and comprehensive summary of the research methods and methodologies used in each article. It also details the people who participated and the analysis techniques and tools that were adopted to analyze the collected data.

According to Table 4, English for Specific Purposes teaching and learning are mostly studied using both qualitative and quantitative methods, with a greater tendency towards the mixed-method approach. This shows that ESP education is complex and requires both numerical and descriptive data to be able to analyze it properly. This is made abundantly clear by the fact that most studies included relied on pre-tests, post-tests, interviews, and surveys/questionnaires to examine the learning outcomes and effectiveness of the teaching strategies used in the ESP context. Moreover, the diversity in sample choices, ranging from university students to professionals in different fields, shows the need for more effective ESP approaches that rely on real-world contexts to elaborate ESP courses.

## 5. Conclusion

A systematic review of the 23 articles included in this study demonstrates several trends and gaps in the field. The analysis highlighted the tendency to rely on mixed-method approaches, primarily in the study of ESP. This approach gives the researcher the opportunity to gather and analyze data that are numerical and descriptive in nature, which helps to give the study more credibility and validity. Data-driven research is commonly used to assess learning outcomes and effectiveness of teaching. Consequently, new and more relevant teaching approaches can be developed to achieve better learning outcomes.

Despite the fact that this study succeeded in answering the research questions, it had several limitations. First, the exploration of only four databases limited the number of articles included. Additional databases such as Springer, JStor, SAGE, and Google Scholar could offer a more comprehensive choice of literature. Moreover, the accessibility to a significant number of studies has prevented the inclusion of many articles in the review and analysis.

Furthermore, future studies that seek to explore the same scope should consider these recommendations and suggestions to achieve better results. Search strings should also be broadened to include more keywords to find more pertinent articles. Finally, more empirical studies should be conducted in the field of ESP teaching and learning.

Overall, this study shows the complexity of ESP teaching and learning and how the assessment of current pedagogical strategies is necessary to improve the teaching/learning process for all learners, whether students or professionals.

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