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► **To cite this version:**

Dacia Dressen-Hammouda. Ethnographic approaches in ESP. Brian Paltridge and Sue Starfield. The Handbook of English for Specific Purposes, Wiley, pp.501-518, 2012, 978-0-470-65532-0. <hal-01015041>

**HAL Id: hal-01015041**

**<https://hal-clermont-univ.archives-ouvertes.fr/hal-01015041>**

Submitted on 25 Jun 2014

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## Ethnographic approaches in ESP

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### 1. Introduction

There is wide agreement today that ESP is largely a teaching-materials driven and learner-centered approach (Dudley-Evans and St John 1998). This focus has developed hand-in-hand with the 'social turn' in language and literacy studies, which considers that language use cannot be realistically described or understood outside its context of social use. As a result, much of the research carried out in ESP over the past decades has been done so with the express intent of improving teaching methods by complicating our understandings of language use. This concern has led to a situation where ESP teaching practice and research have become closely entwined. As noted by Hewings (2002b: v) in his introductory editorial for *English for Specific Purposes*, one of the “great strength[s]” of ESP has been its

... ability to maintain a balance between, on the one hand, the report of sound and interesting research and, on the other, discussion of its implications for pedagogical practice relevant to a wide range of teaching contexts.

In many respects, the motivation to provide authentic descriptions of specialized language-in-context for teaching purposes early on pushed ESP practitioners to try to combine aspects of both quantitative and qualitative approaches into their research methods. Ramani et al. (1988: 83), for example, identify the “first explicit call for an ethnographic approach” in ESP as having originated with Swales' (1985) *Episodes in ESP*. Without necessarily carrying out full ethnographies, ESP studies since the 1980s have demonstrated a desire to develop a more ethnographic, or social use-centered, orientation. This orientation can be seen, for example, in articles from the earlier volumes of the journal, *English for Specific Purposes*, where qualitative techniques such as interviews (Tarone et al. 1981, St. John 1987, Tarantino 1988), surveys and questionnaires (Dunkel and Davy 1989, Mosallem 1984, Zughoul and Hussein 1985), and contextual analyses of sociopolitical or socioeducational factors (Carver 1983, Markee, 1986, McKenna 1986, Huerta et al. 1986, Rounds 1987) were used to meet a shared research goal of providing more authentic descriptions of specialized language use to improve teaching materials. Qualitative and ethnographic-oriented approaches have since become increasingly accepted as part of ESP research practice, as can be seen in the growing number of studies using such methods which have been published in the field's major journals. A survey carried out for the purposes of this chapter<sup>1</sup> shows that for each ten-year period since the early 1980s, that number has tripled.

Given that one of the central concerns in ESP has always been to describe situated language use, it is natural that more ethnographic-oriented approaches have also become more common in ESP. Such approaches allow researchers to better apprehend the sociocultural processes involved in language learning, and to gain more holistic understandings of teacher-student interactions to develop teacher training and

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<sup>1</sup> The survey focused on three journals: *English for Specific Purposes*, *Journal of English for Academic Purposes*, and *Journal of Second Language Writing*. The survey is described in more detail later in this chapter.

courses (Watson-Gegeo 1988). However, the question arises as to whether or not there is also an unrecognized tendency among ESP scholars to borrow from ethnographic approaches without necessarily making explicit the epistemological and theoretical underpinnings of the approaches they adopt, and exploring the implications of these approaches for their research. As seen in related fields such as second language acquisition, applied linguistics and academic writing research, many studies that identify themselves as 'ethnographic' in fact pick and choose from various qualitative methods but without necessarily developing detailed ethnographies nor making their underlying assumptions explicit (Harklau 2011, Lillis 2008, Starfield 2010, Watson-Gegeo 1988). This first question raises yet another: if ethnography is qualitative, but not all qualitative research is ethnographic, then what *is* ethnography? A third, equally important question is, are ethnographic approaches really relevant to ESP-related concerns?

The remainder of this chapter addresses these issues by examining the difficulties involved in defining ethnography. It is neither my purpose to critique existing studies nor to extensively review the ethnographic literature. However, I will argue that there is a framework for ethnographic research which is both applicable to and useful for the specific concerns of ESP research. In this regard, ethnography as a research perspective and method will be outlined, and then illustrated by discussing a few studies from the field of ESP. I will close the chapter by evaluating the usefulness of ethnographic approaches for ESP, in so doing looking at possible areas of future development.

## **2. Difficulties in devising shared ethnographic research practices**

As noted earlier, one of the most significant developments in ESP, which responds to the field's focus on providing authentic descriptions of language in context for teaching purposes, is reflected in the interest given to understanding the relationship between text and context. This more sociocultural orientation in ESP research has caused scholars to devise increasingly complex ways to account for the contextualization of text. One way in which scholars have done this has been to integrate various ethnographic approaches and 'thicker' qualitative methods into research practice. One fairly recent definition of ethnography, grounded in anthropology and sociology, lays down some of the key features of what an ethnographic approach in ESP research might be:

The term ethnography refers to a range of diverse and ever-changing research approaches ... originating in anthropological and sociological research and characterized by first-hand, naturalistic, sustained observation and participation in a particular social setting. The purpose of ethnography is to come to a deeper understanding of how individuals view and participate in their own social and cultural worlds.”  
(Harklau 2005: 179)

Upon first reading, this description of ethnography seems particularly well-adapted to ESP needs, given its focus on gathering information about context that is "first-hand, naturalistic" and situated in particular social settings.

However, it is here that the difficulties begin. For one, there is often a blurring of definitional boundaries between what is properly 'ethnographic' and what is properly 'qualitative', where the two terms have come to be used interchangeably. Complicating this distinction, what scholars mean by 'qualitative' is often not even made explicit. As noted by Harklau (2011) in her review of over 230 articles that use

qualitative methods in second language acquisition research, what is described as qualitative appears either to be used "in a generic sense of *not quantitative*" (Harklau 2011:178, emphasis added) or as indicating preliminary or exploratory research. In addition, the definitional boundaries between the two terms are further blurred by the close and overlapping relationship often assumed to exist between ethnographic and qualitative methods, so that "qualitative research, case studies, naturalistic inquiry, microethnography, interpretive research, ethnography of communication, participant observation and thick description" (Ramanathan and Atkinson 1999: 44) are all perceived as being more or less equivalent. Watson-Gegeo (1988) similarly observes that ethnography has been treated as synonymous with qualitative research, because "any qualitative approach may be called ethnographic in whole or in part, as long as it involves observation in nonlaboratory [i.e., naturalistic] settings" (p. 575). As Harklau (2011) further observes,

Ethnographic or participant observation methodology is frequently invoked [but] typical studies have used the terms generically, and have not followed the anthropological tradition of sustained engagement at a site. ... Instead they have borrowed methods — particularly observation and interviews — in a more circumscribed approach. (p. 179)

Thus, while all ethnographic research is necessarily qualitative, not all qualitative research is necessarily ethnographic. In effect, in-depth interviews, focus groups, and collecting texts are all valuable methods of qualitative inquiry, but do not constitute ethnography if carried out independently of other methods. In other words, ethnography specifically implies a "triangulation" of research methods using multiple sources, methods and researchers (Davis 1995, Lazaraton 1995, Lillis 2008, Starfield 2010, Watson-Gegeo 1988). Triangulation is one important distinctive feature that sets ethnographic research apart from qualitative methods in general, as it "requires the researcher to approach an issue, topic or event in a variety of ways in order to validate the findings" (Johns and Makalela 2011: 202). Other important distinctive features of ethnographic research, as will be discussed later, include sustained engagement over time, participant observation and critical reflection about the role of the researcher (Harklau 2011, Lillis 2008, Starfield 2010).

Another difficulty that arises is that because such a wide range of fields draw on qualitative methods, it is difficult to draw clear epistemological boundaries between types of practice. Harklau (2011) for example has identified two overarching trends in applied linguistics qualitative research. On the one hand, there are sociocultural approaches oriented toward describing the ecological context of language learning, using ethnographic or participant observation, case study, interviews, or practitioner inquiry. On the other, there are approaches, using Conversation Analysis, Systemic Functional Linguistics, or Genre Analysis, which examine the construction of social realities through discourse using audio, video, or textual data. However, within these two broad groups, there is also considerable overlap among categories: discourse-based researchers often highlight the usefulness of including interpretive and empirical orientations in their analysis of discourse, and socioculturally-focused researchers combine their typical research methods with a focus on language in new and opportune ways. While "felicitous and generative", such combinations cause "philosophical and methodological incompatibilities that are left unrecognized or unaddressed by researchers" (Harklau 2011: 182). In somewhat more colorful terms, Watson-Gegeo (1988) raises the

concern that such 'felicitous' combinations can even lead to the loss of ethnography's specificity in terms of long-term site engagement and 'emic' perspective:

Other [self-identified ethnographic studies] involve impressionistic accounts and very short periods of observation (e.g., Lightfoot, 1983). The superficial nature of many studies, which caricature rather than characterize teacher-learning settings, has led Rist (1980) to call them "blitzkrieg ethnography": The researcher "dive-bombs" into a setting, makes a few fixed-category or entirely impressionistic observations, then takes off again to write up the results. (p. 576).

A third difficulty is that scholars also tend to be overly vague about the ontological and epistemological basis for their research practices and intellectual histories (Harklau 2011, Lillis 2008, Scollon 2003, Street 1997). As Harklau (2011) observes, such implicit, underlying forces result in the homogenization of "largely implicit understandings of qualitative research in [the] field" (p. 183) such that scholars often assume a stance which implies that carrying out qualitative or ethnographic-like methods (case study, grounded theory, thick description, practitioner inquiry) is necessary, but without explaining why they do it nor what it adds apart from noting that it creates more nuanced explanations of the phenomena being studied. Such undeclared stances are seen to be "supported by [an] often unexamined and unelaborated endorsement of practices" (p. 183), such as the uncritical adoption of triangulation to ensure scientific validity. The omission of the research traditions that underlie one's choice of approach is also "supported by a canon of qualitative methods... that have a homogenizing influence and may not elaborate fully on the range of ... research traditions available or the philosophical premises underlying them" (p. 183). Even when scholars do explicitly identify the epistemology behind their work, Harklau has observed a wide variety in the traditions and concepts they use to position their research, such that there is little in the way of shared ethnographic research practices in the fields that have adopted them. Such variability in approaches has also led to the situation described by Lillis (2008), who has observed that in studies from EAP, genre studies and academic writing research, researchers might treat ethnography as a simple 'method' for gaining information about context, or conversely as a 'methodology' intended to build more holistic understandings of language and literacy phenomena.

As a result, the incorporation of ethnographic approaches into research practices in applied linguistics and academic writing research tends to lack consistency, with researchers picking and choosing from among the available approaches in ways which suit their immediate research needs, but without widespread reflection as to the full implications of what ethnographic methods actually bring to the understanding of language-learning or literacy acquisition, nor to what the use of ethnographic approaches implies for the research itself (e.g., Starfield 2010, 2011).

One significant consequence of not making the epistemological underpinnings of practice more explicit is the resulting lack of shared criteria for validating research results. For example, researchers using a social context theory will claim that the "realist orientation" of their approaches validates their research, because they seek to recreate realistic descriptions and interpretive-explanations of what people do in particular settings, how they interact with one another and to what end, and how they understand what they are doing. Discourse-based researchers, on the other hand, will gage research validity based on the

"collection and analysis of naturalistic, interactional [i.e., discursal] data" (Harklau 2011, p. 181). However, such means of validating ethnographic inquiry are once again driven by researchers' underlying epistemological motives. Instead, creating validity should result from a set of shared 'good' practices which form the basis of ethnographic research, no matter the field: researchers need to carry out sustained site engagement, use multiple ways of gathering data, multiple observers, peer debriefing, member-checking, write up field notes in a neutral, non-biased language, and carry out observations using a flexible schedule (Carspecken 1996, Starfield 2010). As Starfield (2010) further suggests that the idea of creating "trustworthiness" (p. 56) is more relevant to studies that adopt an ethnographic approach than creating validity in research results, since 'validity' calls up the longstanding debate of needing to justify qualitative and ethnographic research with regard to the positivist paradigm. To allow for trustworthiness, however, it is essential that an emic, or insider, perspective be respected and integrated, whereby participants are asked to give "their perspectives on their own meaning-making practices" (Starfield 2010: 56).

The necessity of designing ethnographic approaches around emic perspectives to create trustworthiness points to one final consequence from not making one's epistemological and ontological orientations explicit, and this is the failure to explore the effects that we, as researchers, necessarily have on the outcome of our research. A critical stance is, however, one of the key legacies of the social turn in language and literacy studies (Street 1997), because all meaning in fact arises emically, not etically. In this regard, the comfortable givens and complacency that result from being satisfied with 'etic', surface-level descriptions of sociocultural context in fact contradict the original justifications for the social turn in writing and language research in the first place, by glossing over the fundamental observation that all language interactions are inherently dynamic, where "individual writing is seen as shaped by complex interactions of social, institutional, and historical forces (see Bakhtin, 1981) that shape access to the privileged discourses of the academy" (Starfield 2011: 175). What is ethnography's fundamentally "collaborative" (Barton and Hamilton 1998) nature naturally leads researchers to follow through with the critical implications of theory:

To the extent that... participants' involvement in the research process altered their self-understandings and empowered them to explore new literacy practices, the study can be seen to have achieved 'catalytic validity' (Lather 1991): a type of validity that many critical researchers would argue is an important outcome of the research process. (Starfield 2010: 56).

### **3. Qualitative and ethnographic, or quantitative approaches in ESP research?**

To investigate the extent to which such qualitative and ethnographic approaches have made their way into ESP research practices, three international peer-reviewed journals in ESP, *English for Specific Purposes* (preceded by *The ESP Journal*, 1980-1985), *Journal of Second Language Writing*, and *Journal of English for Academic Purposes*, were surveyed to identify research reports that have used qualitative and/or ethnographic methods. These journals were chosen as representative of the field of ESP because the articles published relate specifically to ESP concerns; Hewings (2002a), for example, has identified *English for Specific Purposes* as the field's "flagship journal." In addition, the three journals are taken to be interrelated because authors publishing in one of the journals also typically tend to publish in one or both of the other

journals, as well. Specifically, the survey sought to identify what qualitative methods were used most often and whether the use of ethnographic approaches has increased over time.

In the survey, editorials, book reviews and other editorial announcements (calls for papers, conference announcements, etc.) were excluded. All other articles, including research notes and discussions, were included in the final article count (Table 1). Studies were identified as using qualitative methods if authors used at least one, if not a combination of, qualitative methods including: surveys, questionnaires, interviews, case studies, textography, 'ethnography', 'qualitative analysis', participant and non-participant observation, evaluations, onsite visits, focus group interviews, writer reflections, peer reviews, think-aloud protocol, researchers' own intuitions as non-native speakers, narrative, literacy histories, network histories, and a situation or contextual analysis of wider sociocultural, sociohistorical, sociopolitical or socioeducational factors.

The survey period spans 30 years (1980-2010). During this period, 85 articles (8.4%) were identified as using some combination of qualitative methods (Table 1). As similarly observed in other closely-related fields, such as applied linguistics (Gao et al. 2001), the number of ESP-based studies using a qualitative research orientation has grown over time (Figure 1). While in the early 1980s and throughout much of the 1990s, only a couple of articles using qualitative approaches were published each year, between 1999-2007 this number doubled, and doubled again between 2008-2010. However, compared to Gao et al.'s (2001) study, which surveyed the growth of qualitative methods and relative decline of quantitative methods in four major applied linguistics journals over roughly the same period, the current survey found significantly fewer studies using qualitative methods in the three ESP journals examined (Table 1).<sup>2</sup> This difference is likely due to an important methodological distinction made here between qualitative studies and quantitative, text-based analysis. Gao et al. (2001), in contrast, included all textual analyses in their count of qualitative methods.

Table 1. Number of studies using qualitative methods per journal

<b>Journal name</b>	<b>Time period</b>	<b>Number of qualitative studies</b>	<b>Total number of publications</b>	<b>%</b>
<i>English for Specific Purposes</i>	1980 to 2010	51	548	9
<i>Journal of Second Language Writing</i>	1992 to 2010	21	278	7.5
<i>Journal of English for Academic Purposes</i>	2002 to 2010	13	176	7.4
Total no. of articles =		85	1002	8.4

The findings of the current survey are more in line with Harklau (2011), who identified only 17 applied linguistics studies out of 230 (7.4%) which used some form of the term 'ethnography'. In the three ESP journals surveyed, 'ethnography' as a practice also appears quite limited. Only seven studies out of 85

<sup>2</sup> The four journal surveyed by Gao et al. (2001) were *Applied Linguistics*, *TESOL Quarterly*, *The Modern Language Journal*, and *International Review of Applied Linguistics*. Gao et al. (2001) found, for example, that 'qualitative' studies accounted for 18% of the total number of publications, and in some instances (e.g., *TESOL Quarterly*) made up 47% of the studies published in a given year (i.e., 1997).

(8.2%) used some form of the word ‘ethnography’ in their methods description, such as 'learner ethnography', 'ethnographic approach', 'ethnography of lecturers', 'ethnographic account of course design', 'a more ethnographic analysis of the production context', 'a text-ethnographic study' or 'an ethnographically-oriented study of disciplinary practices' (Correa Nunes 1992, Curry and Lillis 2010, Dressen-Hammouda 2008, Flowerdew and Wan 2010, Holliday 1995, Miller 2002, Northcott and Brown 2006, Ramani et al. 1988); just six articles (Boswood and Marriott 1994, Gimenez 2001, Grey 2009, Northcott 2001, Ramani et al. 1988, Holliday 1995) used some form of the term in the title.

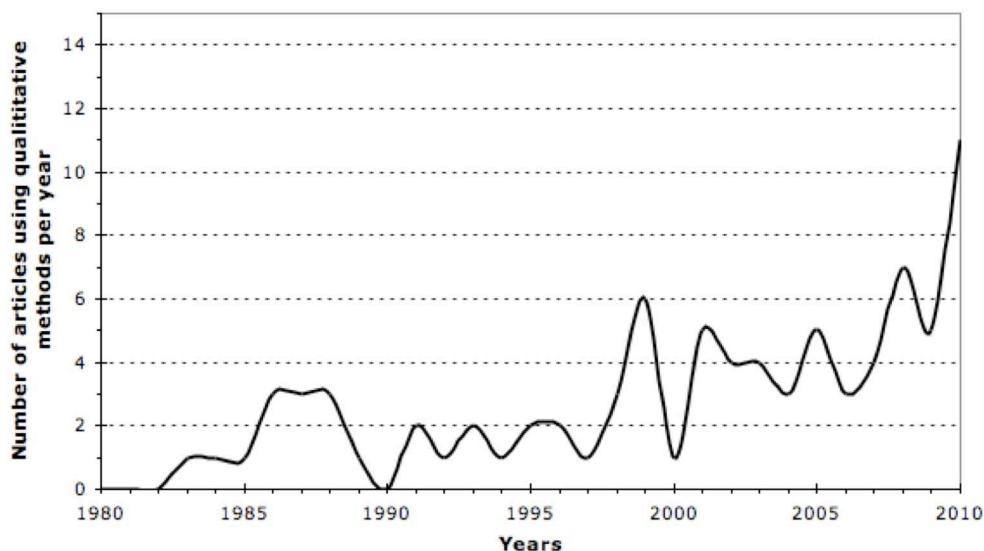


Figure 1. Expansion of qualitative approaches into ESP research practices (1980 – 2010)

As similarly observed by Harklau (2011) for SLA studies, the interview study is by far the most frequently used approach in these journals (n=16), followed by the survey or questionnaire (n=12), and contextual analysis (n=10). However, the number and types of qualitative approaches used have grown significantly in recent years. Since the mid-1990s, case studies, non-participant observations, qualitative analyses, social network analyses, different types of ethnography (e.g., learner ethnography, ethnography of lecturers), and authors’ own intuitions as native speakers have become more frequent. In more recent years (2004-2010), still other qualitative methods have appeared, including reader response, critical contrastive rhetoric, critical reading/rewriting, narrative, simulated blind manuscript review, the analysis of video recordings and focus groups.

Based on the results of this small survey, we can conclude that ESP scholars have adopted a wide range of qualitative and ethnography-inspired methods into their research, even if for the most part, they do not carry out actual ethnographies. The reasons for this qualitative shift, as noted earlier, find their origins in the increasing attention paid to the broader, more contextual aspects of ESP practice. As noted by Bhatia and Gotti (2006: 9-10) for example, ESP scholars' increased interest in developing their understanding of text/context interactions has resulted in a “powerful multidimensional and multi-perspectived framework [which] handle[s] not only the text but also the context” such that “emphases on text and context have almost



been reversed.” Undeniably, the vast majority of ESP studies today are much more context-sensitive than they were in the past, combining the use of case studies, ‘qualitative’ methods, interviews, literacy histories, and specialist informants with their analysis of text. At the same time, however, strong claims about the prevalence of context in current ESP research practices may be somewhat overstated. To the contrary, it can be argued that context has not yet been sufficiently accounted for in approaches to ESP research. In this regard, the text-context dichotomy so often denounced (Berkenkotter, 2001, Devitt, 2004, Matsuda, 2001, Russell, 1997) still persists across many research practices (Lillis, 2008).

In effect, a number of voices caution that ESP research still has not gone far enough in answering fundamental questions relative to bridging the gap between text and context, both conceptually and methodologically. In a series of articles, An Cheng (2006, 2007) for example raises the issue of how little we still know about how people learn genres, despite the large number of studies carried out on the topic (see, for example, Tardy 2006).<sup>3</sup> Cheng (2007) identifies the reason for this gap as stemming from researchers’ overwhelming attention to text. As he observes, “some researchers have previously argued that the judgment on whether a genre has been mastered rests with the discursal and linguistic realization in [a learner’s] text of a target genre” (Pang 2002: 154, cited in Cheng 2007: 302). He challenges today’s ESP research as still being too closely focused on *what* people learn — the “acquisition of increasing complex genres” (Cheng, 2006: 79), or the text — rather than on *how* they learn it, or the context.

Similarly, Theresa Lillis (2008) makes a strong case for why ESP research today still falls short of integrating context into its analysis of text. As she observes, approaches in ESP and related fields such as applied linguistics, composition and rhetoric and genre studies, are strongly influenced by their epistemological grounding in formalist language studies. By nature, such formalist approaches lack the conceptual tools that would allow researchers to truly bridge the gap between text and context, further allowing them to conceptualize and ‘methodologize’ about text and context as being “informed by” rather than “alongside” one another (Lillis 2008: 373). Instead, she cautions that scholarship in ESP and related fields still needs to “move away from a container notion of context (writing *in* context) and towards a notion of contextualization” (p. 381). She concludes with an appeal for developing a more dynamic and fluid understanding of the ongoing interactions between text and context informed by *full*, rather than *partial*, ethnography. The use of full ethnography would provide a much “richer” description of specialized language practices than that made possible by using just case studies, qualitative methods, interviews, and/or specialist informants. An already rich tradition of ESP research could thus be made even more so within a framework for ethnographic research that enables a closer integration of text/context.

#### **4. A framework for ethnographic practices in ESP**

Despite the constraints caused by having so many different overlapping traditions and approaches each bringing its own contribution to ethnographic research, Scollon and Scollon (2001) have identified several

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<sup>3</sup> Tardy (2006) reviews key findings from 60 empirical studies that have investigated the question of how writers learn genres.

key characteristics they find are common to all ethnographic studies. On the one hand, ethnographic studies are seen to share four procedures (fieldwork, participant observation, strange making<sup>4</sup> and contrastive observation), and on the other, at least four types of data, including *members' generalizations* about the significance of artifacts. Members' generalizations are then contrasted with *neutral and objective observations* by the researcher. These types of data are enhanced by accounts of *individual members' experiences*. Finally, the interpretation the analyst gives to the event is validated by inciting *participant feedback* on the analyst's data and interpretations.

One ESP-oriented approach which captures many of these characteristics is Swales' (1998) 'textography', which has been described as "an examination which looks at the texts themselves, as well as the context of production and interpretation of the texts" (Paltridge 2004: 84). Devitt (2004: 65) further underscores how important textographical examinations are of "particular writer(s) writing particular texts" in order to "expose different realities". Notably, textography's ability to 'characterize the particular' lies at the heart its methodology, by explaining individual behavior within the context of its social and cultural context, thus going beyond the researcher's etic perspective by grounding explanations of behavior in observations of actual practice. In addition, a textography collects *members' generalizations* about the significance of discursal artifacts, through text-based interviews. These generalizations are contrasted with *neutral and objective observations* of the discursal object using corpus-based genre analysis. These types of data are enhanced by accounts of *individual members' experiences*, using case studies. Finally, the interpretation the analyst gives to the event is validated by inciting *participant feedback* on the analyst's data and interpretations. Paltridge (2008) and Paltridge et al. (2013) demonstrate a number of ways in which a textography can be carried out, illustrating how combining textual and ethnographic approaches can help critically uncover the "outside forces" which shape individual writing and literacy practices, including both what is possible to say or do and the assumptions made by more expert members about those writers who have less experience with the community's norms and expectations. Textographies make the choices and constraints available (Devitt 2004) more visible to student or non-mainstream writers.

Swales, however, considers a textography to be "something *less* than a full ethnographic account" (1998: 1, emphasis added). While his choice of the term 'textography' naturally evokes ethnography, Swales argues that it especially captures his analytical focus on a particular *individual's* textual extracts rather than on the ways of writing practiced by an *entire* community of practice. Later, he even appears to even step back from the approach entirely:

... in more restrained retrospection, I now believe that such a causal accounting was, at least for investigations that connect with the EAP/ERP field, an error. After all, I was not writing a biography of Bob, but rather trying to understand his texts, seen as those produced by one of several *representative* systematic biologists, in their manifold context. (Swales 2004: 80, original emphasis)

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<sup>4</sup> Scollon and Scollon (2001: 18) describe 'strange making' as the process by which researchers resolve the particular stance they take when they are both participants and observers in a social setting: "As participants we normally do things without thinking much about them. As observers we must come to see these day-to-day activities as "strange" so that we can isolate them and see them *as if* [original emphasis] we did not know exactly what was going on. Either way, whether the researcher comes in as a new participant or brings his or her research project to the familiar, the process "makes strange" what is normally taken for granted."

This excerpt raises at least two issues involved in developing ethnographic approaches for ESP research. The first is the argument that in order to be useful for teaching purposes, which as stated at the outset of this chapter is historically the primary reason for ESP research, studies are expected to describe the practices of a *community* rather than the idiosyncrasies of its members. In this regard, ethnography's focus on *individual* practices and behavior might be considered less useful for devising the sorts of descriptions expected for ESP applications. The second issue also raised by this excerpt is how researchers are to draw relevant information from their interpretations, or create 'trustworthiness' (Starfield 2010). Neither of these issues can be answered by the framework for ethnographic research as it is proposed by Scollon and Scollon (2001), nor can it be answered by Swales' textography, neither of which make explicit key elements of ethnography such as sustained engagement over time (Harklau 2011, Lillis 2008) and critical reflection about role of the researcher (Starfield 2011). These are important issues for ESP research and will be further discussed below.

A response to the first issue — that it is not what is *unique* in individual writing but what is common to a *group* of individuals' writing that holds value for ESP — is suggested by Watson-Gegeo's (1988) outline of principles for carrying out ethnographic research. Similarly to Scollon and Scollon (2001), she notes that ethnography describes *individual behavior*. However, while ethnographic research is interested in individuals and individual differences in behavior, it is also interested in resituating that behavior within the trends of the social group. Thus, Watson-Gegeo's second principle states that ethnographic research is necessarily *holistic*, meaning that individual behavior must be understood within "the whole system of which it is a part" (Watson-Gegeo 1988: 577). Her third principle states that ethnography is also *comparative*, in the sense that researchers build cognitive models of the situations they study and then extrapolate their observations from that situation to an understanding of other situations. Finally, it is crucial that each situation be understood from the *perspective of the participants* (an emic approach), and not from that of the researcher (an etic approach); in addition, gathering such information takes time, necessitating sustained engagement in the research site. As later argued by Davis (1995), a careful distinction needs to be made between etic and emic approaches in qualitative research. In emic approaches, the researcher gathers data through interviews, observations, and other techniques, but does so "within the time frame necessary for gaining an understanding of the actors' meanings for social actions" (Davis 1995: 433). In contrast, etic-oriented studies do not require extended engagement with participants because they

determine the variables under investigation, collect data by examining or controlling externally (to the population under investigation) variables, analyze the data according to external perspectives (e.g., researcher-determined categorization schemes), and interpret data according to external criteria. (Davis 1995: 433)

More recently, Lillis (2008) describes a set of ethnographic frameworks which, in an incremental fashion, allow ESP researchers to move between emic and etic perspectives depending on research motives, and beyond the disconnect between text and context. While evaluating the usefulness of these approaches, Lillis also suggests reasons why ethnography is perhaps not carried out more fully in ESP, although it is

mostly a matter of making the various epistemological traditions in ethnography more explicit in practice. She identifies three levels of ethnography currently used in studies that have a qualitative research orientation: 'ethnography as method', 'ethnography as methodology', and 'ethnography as deep theorizing'.

Interestingly, what she identifies as 'ethnography as method' lends weight to the observation that much ESP research tends to be overly text-oriented:

Ethnography hovers in the background of much research on academic writing that seeks to be context sensitive, through an array of often oblique glosses, such as "case study" and "qualitative", but is often reduced to the level method, and most commonly to one method, that of talk around texts. (Lillis 2008: 381)

What Lillis means by 'ethnography as method' is that the qualitative data collected is limited to a single type: *talk around text*. While 'talk-around-text' is without a doubt an important methodological addition to combined qualitative-quantitative approaches, Lillis contends that many ESP, EAP and genre scholars continue to focus more on the text rather than the context, thereby producing studies of "text-focused talk" (2008: 359). She also identifies qualitative practices which incorporate more 'writer-focused talk', such as in the writing pedagogy research conducted in US composition and rhetoric programs, and in academic literacies research from the UK. And yet while 'talk-around-text' in general is a significant improvement over a purely quantitative textualist lens, Lillis pinpoints a number of limitations with viewing ethnography as method. As she notes, text in this approach is treated as a complex phenomenon, but the talk around it "tends to be treated as straightforwardly transparent, a simple reflection of the writer's perspective" (2008: 361). Although it is important to take talk into account, she cautions that it must be read at at least three different levels: (1) as a 'realist' tale; (2) as indexing relevant aspects of the community of practice, of self, and of writing; and (3) as a performative indicator of the power relations between researcher and writers being researched and how this influences the outcome of the talk (Lillis 2008: 366). As a consequence, she argues strongly for using other methods of ethnographic research than just talk-around-text.

Sue Starfield (2011) echoes these concerns by pointing to the problems inherent in describing context by simply using qualitative methods such as interviews, observations or case studies. As this is a case of treating ethnography simply as 'method', designed to produce "talk around text" by positioning the research from the outside looking in, researchers are methodologically comforted in maintaining a more narrow and limited understanding of the nature of social context by adopting methods which on the surface seem to "get at" social context, but which in truth remain on the 'outside' of meaning (see also Street 1997). Using ethnography merely as method produces neither the "thick description" (Geertz 1973) nor the triangulation of methods needed for developing trustworthiness in results, i.e., that one is more accurately describing the social aspects of language and literacy practices.

A second type of ethnographic research Lillis (2008) identifies is 'ethnography as methodology'. This type of ethnographic research differs from ethnography as method through its long-term site and actor engagement, drawing from the idea that "long conversations" (Maybin 1994) are a useful means for gathering information. As examples of possible methods she cites literacy history interviews, where the researcher "elicits autobiographical accounts of language and academic literacy learning to frame current

practices and perspectives” (Lillis 2008: 362). The literacy history interview incites continued research through “cyclical dialogue around texts over a period of time” (p. 362). As she argues, the longer dialogue allows the analyst to explore the writer-participant’s evolving relationship with discourses, writing practices and identity while opening up possibilities for the writer-participant to offer up relevant observations to the researcher.

A second way in which ethnography as methodology differs from ethnography as method is the practice of collecting and analyzing multiple sources of data to build more "holistic" understandings (Watson-Gegeo, 1988) of the text-context interaction. To create such holistic understandings, the various data collected need to reflect both “thick *descriptive*” practices (Geertz 1973), by “observ[ing] and collect[ing] everything that may prove (potentially) to be significant, building up a detailed pictures of places, people, and resources” (Lillis 2008: 368) using journals, field notes, or photos, as well as “thick *participative*” practices (Sarangi 2006, 2007), which involves “a form of [researcher] socialisation in order to achieve a threshold for interpretive understanding” (Lillis 2008: 367). Such data help “remind the researcher of the importance of staying located in writers’ specific sociohistorical trajectories and to avoid reading the data (in this case, people’s lives and perspectives) through any straightforward theoretical (etic) lens” (2008: 372). One limitation of ethnography as methodology Lillis identifies is that while it allows the researcher to more effectively bridge the gap between text and context, “there is often no parallel move... circulating back from context to text” (p. 374). In other words, while such approaches effectively bring the researcher to more fully reflect on the complexities of context, they do not push the researcher to come back full circle by seeing how context is actually textualized. For this reason, she moves on to a third type of ethnography, as a way of developing ever more nuanced ways of relating text and context.

The third type of ethnography is what Lillis, following Blommaert (2007), calls ‘ethnography as deep theorizing’. Using this perspective of ethnography can, she claims, narrow the gap between text and context by using two context-sensitive categories drawn from linguistic ethnography: *indexicality* and *orientation* (p. 376). Because unlike formalist language studies, linguistic ethnography assumes no disconnect between text and context, indexicality acts as an intermediary or mediational category that helps bridge the gap between text and context, thereby “radically challeng[ing] the dichotomy between language and culture” (p. 381). More will be said about the importance of indexicality as a mediational category between text and context in the next section.

In response to the second issue raised by Swales' discussion of the limitations of textography — i.e., managing the researcher's role in the study and drawing relevant information from interpretation — one can argue that such questioning is an inherent part of doing emic-oriented, qualitative research. Moving beyond comfortable predictability in research practices and narrow assumptions about the nature of social action requires taking a critical stance, and assuming that position can be difficult. In defense of critical research, Street (1997) nonetheless recognizes that taking a critical stance is uncomfortable because there are no givens in what meaning will emerge; there is thus a natural temptation to want to reduce complexity in ways that make it manageable and less messy. However, doing so risks oversimplifying situations and creating

dangerously reductive — and therefore politically manipulable — understandings of social complexity (see Street 1997 for further discussion). Arguably, researchers of language and literacy need to keep as much complexity as possible in their research into social practices, so as to facilitate learners' engaged discussions about the nature and meaning of language and literacy practices rather than expecting them to act as the "passive victims of [those practices'] structural properties" (Street 1997: 83).

As advocated by Street (1997), Starfield (2011) and others, one of the most basic actions one can undertake to develop a critical stance is to make one's epistemological and theoretical background explicit, because this background "(implicitly or explicitly) informs the questions that researchers ask; the assumptions which we make; and the procedures, methods and approaches we use to carry out research (Pierce 1995: 569, cited by Starfield 2011: 175). In addition, only a critical approach to research can produce the sort of "deep theorizing" (Lillis 2008) necessary to producing trustworthy accounts of literate practice, by reducing the gap between text and context. In other words, "critical ethnographic work, and the understandings of context it affords, can illuminate not only how texts are produced and received but also how contexts for writing are constituted and what constitutes context" (Starfield 2011: 176). Given its focus on researcher reflexivity and location and attention to unequal power relations and legitimacy (Bourdieu 1991, Kress 1997), the critical approach to ethnography described by Starfield (2011) better allows researchers to bridge the gap between text and context by showing greater sensitivity to issues of agency and to the power of indexicality, or "how texts point to (index) specific discourses on identity, writing, academia and power" (Starfield 2011: 177). Why issues of agency and indexicality should be central topics in ESP research will be addressed in the closing section of this chapter.

To conclude this section, Table 2 summarizes some of the main points that have been raised here concerning ethnography as a research perspective and methodology. It will be used as a basis to discuss a few recent studies from ESP that use an ethnographic approach in research.

Table 2. Summary of surveyed ethnographic approaches and analytical focus

	<u>Ethnographic approach or principles</u>	<u>Methodological focus</u>
Scollon and Scollon (2001)	Fieldwork Participant observation Strange-making Contrastive observation	Members' generalizations Discourse, practices Individual experiences Participant feedback/validation
Watson-Gegeo (1988)	Triangulation of methods and focus on: - Individual behavior - Whole system ('holistic') analysis - Differences between contexts - 'Emic' perspective	People's behavior in a particular setting The behavior's social organization - social rules - interactional expectations - cultural values
Lillis (2008)	Ethnography as method  Ethnography as methodology - long-term site engagement - multiple data sources - researchers' influence on outcome  Ethnography as deep theorizing	Talk-around-text - text-focused talk - writer-focused talk Thick descriptive practices (Geertz 1973) - places, people, resources Thick participative practices (Sarangi 2006) - researcher socialization  Mediational categories of text-context - indexicality - orientation

Starfield (2011)	Critical ethnography	Reflexively designed research practice Theoretical assumptions made explicit Assumes that social processes are historically and structurally located in unequal power relations Assumes unequal access to linguistic resources and legitimacy Sensitivity to the relative autonomy of human agent within social systems Exploration of how relations of domination are sustained Recognizes the power of indexicality Homogeneity of culture/community refuted
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## 5. Current ethnographic orientations in ESP research

It is a bit difficult to decide on exactly *what* studies to include that may be considered to fall within the domain of ESP. Many interesting studies of academic and/or professional writing, for example, use an ethnographic framework to organize their research. Although clearly relevant and frequently cited by ESP scholars, studies such as those by Anne Beaufort (1999)<sup>5</sup>, Paul Prior (1998)<sup>6</sup>, or Roz Ivanič (1998)<sup>7</sup> fall more into the category of 'related' fields, including rhetoric and composition, professional discourse or academic writing research, rather than being ESP studies, per se. Using the discussion from Räisänen and Fortenet-Gómez (2008), I have therefore limited the following review of ethnographic studies in ESP to those concerned explicitly with describing how non-native speakers of English learn to navigate and manage the communicative imperatives of interacting in situated settings (professional, academic, etc). In addition, given the field's specific concerns of designing effective descriptions for teaching purposes using text/context interactions, I have also focused on those studies which combine an analysis of textual and ethnographic data to explore the processes of text production in its situated contexts.

One first illustration of an ESP-oriented ethnographic approach that is centrally relevant to ESP concerns is Ann Johns and Leketi Makalela's (2011) critical approach to devising needs analysis. As they indicate at the outset of their article, often times needs assessment is treated as though it were an "objective" endeavor, although it is most certainly influenced by the background assumptions and expectations of each party — the 'client' as well as the 'consultant' — which, when in conflict or unstated, can adversely affect the outcome of the proposed assessment. Based on the authors' own experience, they describe the importance of following the guidelines of critical ethnography described by Madison (2003) in devising needs analysis, in order to be able to "predict our own potential to do harm" and to "make a contribution to equity, freedom and justice" (Johns and Makalela 2011: 217). At the same time, they underscore a claim made by critical ethnographers by applying it to ESP researchers' and teachers' work which "cannot be 'objective', and free from [their] own frames, intentions and purposes" (p. 217).

<sup>5</sup> Cited for example by Cheng 2006, 2008, So 2005, Swales 2004, and Tardy 2006.

<sup>6</sup> Cited by Askehave and Swales 2001, Benesch 2001, Flowerdew 2000, Hyland 2005, and Lillis 2001.

<sup>7</sup> Cited by Casanave 2002, Hirvela and Belcher 2001, Hyland 2001, and Tang 1999.

Another key ethnographic approach in ESP studies is Sue Starfield's (1999, 2010, 2011) critical ethnography of the ways in which student writers negotiated their textual identities through writing over the course of a year, in the context of the final years of official apartheid in South Africa. To address the concerns raised initially, namely why black students for whom English was an additional language were encountering higher failure rates in academic writing classes than white students, Starfield engaged in both "thick descriptive practices" (Geertz 1973) and "thick participatory practices" (Sarangi 2006). She conducted both non-participant and participant observations in multiple teaching/learning contexts, conducted in-depth semi-structured interviews, collected documents including students' essays, tests and exams, the student handbook used in class, and also student-published newspapers and political pamphlets. She collected data in multiple sites and took extensive fieldnotes about what went on in lecture halls, tutorials, graders' meetings, weekly tutor briefings, in the office of one of the tutors, and in hall conversations. She engaged in 'thick participation', noting that "in some respects [she] was like a student" (Starfield 2010: 60) by attending all weekly lectures with several hundred students, plus the weekly tutorial with a group of 30 students, and by reading all of the students' course materials. In this way, she was able to develop a critical perspective, looking at the ways in which some black students' academic writing success was related to ways in which they constructed successfully identities in political and union organizations outside the university, or how the Student Handbook used in class vehicled a point of view in which student identities from disadvantaged backgrounds were at odds with mainstream identities. Finally, she triangulated her results by having her evolving interpretations evaluated by participants via a series of semi-structured interviews with both students and staff, thereby creating trustworthiness. Some of the implications of the study for the field of ESP are, like for Johns and Makalela (2011), the necessity of assuming a critical stance in all research and teaching work. However, this explicitly calls for reflexivity on the part of the researcher, who makes explicit not only her or his own epistemological assumptions but also the role played during the research through interactions with the study participants. It also calls for unambiguously making clear the implications of unequal power and legitimacy involved in all social interactions, and in exploring the repercussions of this imbalance with the social actors involved.

Theresa Lillis and Mary Jane Curry's longitudinal study of how scholars from four national contexts (Hungary, Slovakia, Spain and Portugal) manage their participation in expanding research networks is yet another illustration of ethnographic approaches in ESP. By studying how scholars gained access to essential resources for publication in English-medium journals (Lillis and Curry 2006, 2010, Curry and Lillis 2010), they have devised what they call a "text-oriented ethnographic" approach which involves collecting and analyzing both textual and ethnographic data in a sustained manner (at the time of the 2010 publications, the study had already been running for nine years). Ethnographic data include (1) observations of participants' activity in context; (2) repeated semi-structured interviews with each of the participants; and (3) concomitant and ongoing communication with participants via email, mail and the telephone. The textual data include drafts of the participants' texts and correspondence with editors, reviewers and colleagues (manuscripts, comments, revised texts). Overall, they "made 60 field visits, conducted approximately 260 interviews,



collected around 1200 texts by participants and 500 items of correspondence between participants and editors..., [constructed] 240 text histories [and obtained] scholars' perspectives on their experiences" (Curry and Lillis 2010: 283). The aim of the study was to document the participants' 'text histories', by exploring how the manuscripts changed as they crossed boundaries in both local national contexts as well as international contexts, as negotiated from the point of view of the authors participating in the study. To get at this perspective, a number of methodological tools were used: *text histories*, which were based on the manuscripts, comments and revised versions as well as interviews with authors; *talk around text*, which was collected via interviews with authors and all correspondence related to the evolving manuscripts; *academic research networks*, by which the researchers examined authors' social and research networks; *heuristics for tracking changes across drafts*; and *indexicality* and *orientation*, or the underlying meaning gleaned about stance from textual features in the manuscripts and in comments from reviewers. Some of the study's implications for the field of ESP suggest the importance for individual scholars of participating in and sustaining local and international networks, and of finding the necessary resources to support this activity.

Of course, as Lillis (2008) cautions, "isolating data extracts in the way [one does in the research article] runs counter to the holistic "pull" of ethnography whereby... a key aim is the weaving together of data in order to understand a particular phenomenon" (p. 356). The publication of a large-scale ethnographic study in book form (e.g., Lillis and Curry 2010) gives a greater sense of the complexity involved in the topic studied — such as publishing in English by nonnative speakers of English — than is possible to capture with shorter, article-length research reports. Doubtlessly, this is a major reason why such studies tend to be rare in ESP, as it is difficult to convey the full scope of an ethnographic approach when having to choose what to focus on from the wealth and range of ethnographic data, within the constraints of the research article.

In this regard, the longitudinal study partially reported on in Dressen-Hammouda (2008, *forthcoming*) falls into this situation. Whereas Lillis and Curry have examined the publication difficulties encountered by nonnative speakers of English, the work I have been developing since Dressen (2002a) deals with the topic of disciplinary acculturation, and on describing what changes in genre knowledge, practices, identity, perspectives, attitudes and ideology need to occur within an individual as she or he moves into a new disciplinary community and is granted 'membership' as a researcher. To explore this theme, the study combines both etic and emic qualitative approaches to create two overlapping stories which examine the acculturation process from the inside and out. On the one hand, an individual's progress is tracked over an eight-year period, as he moves from being a third-year undergraduate in geology to a research/teaching faculty member two years into his tenure. On the other, the story is also told against the sociohistorical and cultural backdrop of disciplinary history and the description of its members' practices, in order to shed more light onto understanding what necessarily happens to individuals during the process of disciplinary acculturation. The study brings together a wide range of qualitative methodological approaches to bear on the examination of disciplinary acculturation, including socio-historical analysis, literacy narratives, text-based interviews, long conversations about disciplinary and writing practices taking place over several years, shorter conversations about geological history and practice using focus groups, accounts of members' generalizations, case studies, my own stance as a researcher involved in observation-participation and quasi

'strange-maker', analyses of a wide range of textual artifacts (field notebooks, drawings, field reports, conference abstracts, research articles, dissertation chapters and course lecture notes) and tracking the changes in the individual student's and other participants' textual artifacts over time using "recontextualization" (Bernstein, 1990, Linell, 1998, Berkenkotter, 2001, Dressen, 2002) and standard deviation analysis (Dressen-Hammouda *forthcoming*). Some of the study's implications for the field of ESP include how successful disciplinary acculturation and genre mastery requires becoming proficient in a disciplinary culture's implicit and indexical system, and how much useful understanding there is to be gleaned about general learning processes from a close study of individual behavior and agency.

## 6. Concluding remarks

To conclude this chapter, I would like to address the issue of whether the types of text-ethnographic approaches described here might be considered *too* qualitative for ESP practice? Clearly, the purpose of using ethnographic methods is to uncover how individuals themselves understand how their participation in their social activities constructs their social and cultural worlds, which supports ESP concerns by better providing more nuanced understandings of the text-context relationship. Nonetheless, a number of prominent ESP and genre specialists over the years have raised concern that such trends in ESP research will take it too far a field from its applied and pragmatic concerns. Swales (2000), for instance, has raised concern that ESP's ever-more complicated epistemological assumptions, which view genre analysis and pedagogy as inextricably tied to an increasingly complex analysis of its socio-historical underpinnings, its culture and ideology, will ultimately place ESP research out of the reach of its practitioners. Clearly, combining quantitative and qualitative analysis through sustained ethnographic approaches requires researchers to be trained in a multitude of analytic methods, and the resulting studies tend to be both time-consuming and expensive. This, in turn, has an ongoing effect on the sustainability and validity of qualitative and ethnographic research as researchers do not necessarily follow prescriptions about what one should, or should not, do and as a result, the methodologies presented and discussed in the literature do not necessarily match the reality of the research undertaken in the field.

From another angle, Freedman (1999) has also commented that the contextualizing and complicating trend made possible with ethnographic methods has made it nearly impossible to teach a genre unless one also knows its cultural, historical and ideological underpinnings. Similarly, in his departing editorial for *English for Specific Purposes*, Dudley-Evans (2001) raises concern about the usefulness of such research for ESP's specific concerns:

While not in any way rejecting the need for theory and analysis in ESP, I do feel that we are reaching a stage where we need to consider how effective the courses that are developed from this research are. Are we really delivering in the ESP classroom? Are students in ESP classes more motivated than those in General English classes? (p. 312)

Hyland (2002), however, makes a strong argument for using ethnographic approaches to continue developing the specificity of ESP research so as to preserve its usefulness for teaching purposes. He points to the community's increasing knowledge about the specificity of disciplinary writing tasks and to the wide

variation seen in genre exemplars across disciplines and professions. Such distinctions have been brought to light not only by a sizeable collection of survey studies, but additionally by ethnographic methods. As he notes, ethnographic case studies paint a more accurate, albeit complicated, picture of generic norms and of literacy.

In the past decade since such concerns were raised, ESP research has definitively gone the way of complexifying language and teaching descriptions, even to the point of no longer having any choice but to continue going down that road. Thanks to an impressive collection of ethnographic studies on literacy development, we have now learned much about the nature of discursual expertise and literacy (Herrington 1981, Berkenkotter and Huckin 1995, Haas 1994, Geisler 1994, Ivanič 1998, Beaufort 1999, 2007, Lillis and Curry 2010, Myers 1990, Prior 1998, Barton & Hamilton 1998). From such studies, we have learned that the world of others' words shapes the complex of abilities and knowledge that enable people to function in and contribute to specific situations. Thus, a writer in the disciplines, the sciences and the professions today needs to know not only how to write a specific genre exemplar but also when to write it and under what circumstances. Literacy is a complex and lifelong process, where writing and reading skills continue to develop into adulthood through the interiorization of language tools and systems in various contexts. To better understand this process, gaining a better grasp of the intricacies of individual agency is of utmost importance.

Similarly, a wide bed of research in linguistics, cognitive psychology, reading and rhetoric has resulted in the realization that little meaning is actually seen on the page and that specialist readers and writers must reconstruct relevant meaning through a process of common inference and understanding of convention. A communicative act is considered to be effective, intelligible and 'legitimate' only because it provides pertinent information to readers in a form they find appropriate, thereby binding itself, its readers and writers within shared frames of knowledge, although this knowledge is only referenced through indexicality (Dressen-Hammouda 2008, Huckin 2002, Lillis and Curry 2010, Swales 2004, Tardy and Matsuda 2009).

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