

Nursing Students' English Language Learning Needs and Perceptions

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Abstract

Nursing students should learn English language courses which focus on a restricted range of skills required by them for their profession. Cognizant of this, the researchers in this study surveyed specific English language needs of undergraduate nursing students. The study used Hutchinson and Waters' (1987) approach to analyze nursing students' needs of English language skills and sub-skills to study their field effectively, their level of proficiency in English language skills and their perceptions of the relevance of the courses offered to them. To collect data, questionnaire and interview were used. The results showed that students are more proficient in reading and writing about health related issues than speaking and listening. Students reported that they could read and understand medical texts, instruments and reports written by doctors. It was also found out that students could write patient history, prescriptions and medication procedures. The study concluded that the courses which nursing students are taking are irrelevant. There is need to design specific courses which improve their reading and writing skills in their field.

Keywords: field related courses, needs analysis, profession, read medical articles, writing about health related issues,

Introduction

English is lingua-franca as an instrument of communication worldwide. This is particularly true when we look at the language of medicine. Studies show that the use of English in the field of medicine and other related fields is increasing. For example, Benfield and Howard (2000) who analyzed MEDLINE found that English use in medical publications increased from 72.2% to 88.6%. Also, Maher (1986), who analyzed a database called MEDLINE Index Medicus, which publishes biomedical works noted a plethora of articles are being written in English. He also surveyed the perceptions of medical professionals towards English. The results revealed that 96.7% of the doctors read medical publications in English. In addition to this, teaching English language has shifted from English as a foreign language (EFL) or English as a second language (ESL) to English for Specific Purposes (ESP) which requires a close analysis of learners' field of study. In this respect, the practitioners of the field of medicine need to take courses and materials to address their practical needs since teaching General English does not guarantee their wants. They need to study English which focuses on skills such as writing medical papers or preparing talks for a medical meeting, knowing medical jargon, vocabularies and register, understanding scientific texts, reading technical textbooks as well as searching technical journals to meet their specific English language needs (Rahimi, 2008 & Kurfürst, 2005)). For this purpose, students need to learn English for Medical Purposes (EMP). English for Medical Purposes is an English for specific Purpose (ESP) course which refers to the teaching of English for health care personnel like doctors, and nurses.

In order to design a course which helps medical students acquire English medical jargon, information about medical register and discourse, there is a need to analyze their unique needs of how they use and learn the language for education and job related tasks. They need to have English for Specific Purposes (ESP) course to enhance their communication skills and use the English language effectively in various job-related situations. As Hutchinson and Waters (1987) claim ESP is a learner-centered approach which aims to meet the language needs of particular group of learners. They add that all the decisions on what/how to teach English should be made on the basis of the language needs of the particular learners.

Drawing on Hutchinson and Waters' (1987) model of needs analysis, the present study attempts to investigate nursing students' English language learning needs. Moreover, it described their perceptions of the relevance of English language courses they took before they joined the nursing department. It also described the perceptions of their language skills. This research specifically tried to answer the following research questions:

1. What is nursing students' perception of the English language course they took at the university before joining their department?
2. What are their needs of English language skills?
3. What is the perception of their proficiency level in different language skills?

Methodology

Research Paradigm

Since needs have a subjective reality, the current research is exploratory in nature and is located within the interpretive paradigm of research. Therefore, to understand the students' English language needs, it was necessary to obtain perceptions of nursing students. This paradigm helped the researcher to understand the participants' subjective views that were closely linked to their context (Creswell, 2007). Consequently, the participants' behavior was foregrounded, their views and meanings of the research phenomenon were analyzed and interpreted inductively, and knowledge was constructed in their social and cultural context (Creswell, 2007).

Research Design

This study is based on Hutchinson and Waters' (1987) approach to needs analysis to investigate English language learning needs of nursing students. Therefore, to address the research problem and explore it from multiple sources in a systematic way, the research used exploratory sequential design (Dornyei, 2007).

Participants of the study

The participants of this study were nursing students of the College of Health Science and Medicine in Debre Markos University. There are 3 specializations in nursing department: Pediatrics, Midwife and General Nursing. According to information obtained from the department heads, there were 177 students in the three specializations. From these, fifteen students were excluded from the main study since they were used for pilot testing. Questionnaire was distributed to 162 students. However, only 132 of the students filled in and returned the questionnaire. By using random sampling, six students (two from each specialization) were interviewed.

Instruments of Data Collection

Interview

The present study employed semi-structured interviews. The interview guide focused on three issues. The first part asked nursing students' proficiency level of different language skills. The second issue elicited participants' views on the most important language skills for nursing students

for their current and future study. The final part asked them the relevance of the courses they took before they joined nursing department.

Questionnaire

To collect quantifiable data, questionnaire was used as an instrument. The aim of the questionnaire was to discover nursing students' language needs, the perceptions of their proficiency and relevance of the courses they took. The first part of the questionnaire was developed to assess the participants' proficiency level (1=not efficient at all to 5=very efficient) in the four English language skills (speaking, reading, listening and writing). Part two of the questionnaire was developed to get the participants' insight of the relevance and appropriateness of the current language courses for their profession. This part consisted of 10 general questions which asked the participants to rate the usefulness of the English language course they took to their language learning needs (1 = strongly, 5 = Strongly Disagree). In part three, the participants were asked to share their needs of different English language skills and sub-skills. This part consisted of 26 items (7 items about reading, 6 items about writing, 5 items about listening and 8 items about speaking). They were requested to rate the items (1 = not important at all, 5 =very important).

Validity and Reliability of the Instruments

To test the tools and identify any potential issues that would affect the data collection procedure for the main study, piloting was conducted. Fifteen students were asked to participate in piloting the questionnaire. The pilot test was conducted on twenty students who were excluded for the main study. The participants of the pilot study were asked to give their comments on the clarity of the instructions, questions and items. In addition to this, they were asked to give their reasons why they were unclear. Questions which they left unanswered were given focus and improved.

Data Analysis Procedure

Since the study was exploratory, interview was conducted before the questionnaire. By interviewing, ideas which could strengthen and broaden the scope of the questionnaire were obtained. Based on this, the questionnaire was modified. This then was followed by checking the reliability of the questionnaire was checked at the significant level. After checking its reliability, the questionnaire was administered to 162 students of nursing students. Before the distribution of the questionnaire, the participants were informed of the purposes and the importance of the study. After collecting the required data, the researcher analyzed the responses based on Hutchinson and Waters' (1987) model of target language needs analysis. Frequency, means and standard deviation of each sections of the needs analysis questionnaire was calculated.

Results

Nursing Students Proficiency Level in the four Language skills

In the first part of the questionnaire students were asked to rate the level of their proficiency in the four language skills. Students were asked to rate their proficiency level from 1=not efficient at all to 5=very efficient. The following table shows the results.

Table 1. Participants self-evaluation of their proficiency level

	My English courses at university should focus on	N	Min.	Max.	Mean	Grand Mean
Reading Skills	Read and understand medical texts	132	3.00	5.00	4.33	4.16
	Read and understand instructions of medical instruments	132	3.00	5.00	4.09	
	Read and understand course pamphlets	132	2.00	4.00	3.69	

	My English courses at university should focus on	N	Min.	Max.	Mean	Grand Mean
	Read and understand medical notes	132	3.00	4.00	4.11	
	Read and understand instructions of drugs	132	3.00	5.00	4.71	
	Read and understand medical manuals	132	2.00	5.00	3.74	
	Read and understand nursing reports written by a doctor	132	4.00	5.00	4.51	
Writing Skills	Write patient history and prescriptions	132	3.00	5.00	4.70	4.04
	Write research articles/research reports	132	2.00	3.00	2.99	
	Write instructions of medication procedures	132	3.00	5.00	4.60	
	Write notes	132	3.00	5.00	4.83	
	Write class assignments	132	3.00	5.00	4.23	
	Write project	132	2.00	3.00	2.90	
Listening Skills	Listening to medical lectures	132	3.00	4.00	3.88	3.97
	Listening to recorded lessons	132	4.00	5.00	4.10	
	Listening to instructions and explanations of medical instruments	132	3.00	4.00	3.80	
	Listening to presentations in conferences	132	4.00	5.00	4.12	
Speaking Skills	asking questions in class	132	3.00	4.00	3.46	3.78
	Exchanging opinions about a nursing issue in a meeting	132	3.00	4.00	3.80	
	Giving instructions orally on how to operate a nursing device	132	3.00	5.00	4.18	
	Giving instructions orally on how to follow medication procedure	132	2.00	4.00	3.02	
	phone-calling for assistance in emergency situations	132	3.00	4.00	4.19	
	Communicative functions such as requesting, advising	132	2.00	3.00	4.05	

As Table 1 above shows, the participants perceived that they are more efficient in reading skills (Grand Mean = 4.16) followed by writing skills (Grand Mean= 4.04) than listening (Grand Mean = 3.97) and speaking (Grand Mean = 3.78). It is indicated that students have less perceived efficiency in speaking and listening skills compared to the other two skills. The means of many of the reading sub-skills were four and above except the two items which had grand means less than 4. This shows that all the participants are efficient in reading sub-skills. For the writing sub-skills, the results revealed that most of the items had mean above 4 except the two items which show a mean of below average, i.e. less than 3.00. As it is indicated writing articles/thesis and project had grand means of 2.99 and 2.90 respectively.

From the four sub-skills of listening, the findings showed that two items had the mean scores above 4.00 while the other two indicated slightly above grand mean of 4.00. Students were asked to rate 6 sub-skills of speaking. The results found that 3 of the items had the mean scores above 4.00 while the other 3 had a mean of above 4.00.

Students Perceptions of the relevance of English language courses they took

In the second part of the questionnaire ten items were used to find out if the courses students' took at the university were appropriate and relevant to their field. They were requested to rate 1 = strongly to 5 = Strongly Disagree. The following table shows their responses.

Table 2. Students perceptions of the relevance of English courses they took at the university

The English language courses I took (Communicative English Skills I and II)	N	Min.	Max.	Mean	Std. Dev.
1. equipped me with enough skill /knowledge of medical English	124	1.00	3.00	2.42	.53694
2. were adequate for my profession as a nurse	126	1.00	4.00	2.32	.73242
3. met my language needs to function successfully in my academic studies	132	1.00	4.00	2.80	.72248
4. helped me to cope with the content of the nursing textbooks effectively	132	2.00	4.00	2.50	.51379
5. met my language needs to function effectively in my future career	132	2.00	4.00	2.66	.72372
6. require no change in structure	132	1.00	2.00	2.46	.50059
7. increased my learning motivation	132	2.00	4.00	3.48	.63283
8. Developed my general skill/knowledge in English	132	4.00	5.00	4.56	.49690
9. Be replaced by other courses	132	3.00	5.00	4.00	.70046
10. Be supplemented by English courses related to our field	132	4.00	5.00	4.41	.49505

The first five items in this part of the questionnaire were used to know if the courses students took equipped them for their profession. As table 2 above shows students were dissatisfied with the English courses they took since the mean of all these items is less than the average mean (M=3.00). When students were requested if the courses they took need no change, they disagreed (M=2.46). The mean of the item which asked if the courses were motivating is only a little higher than the average mean (M=3.48) which shows the courses' inability to motivate them. It seems that students were happy with the courses when it comes to the courses' ability to develop their general skill/knowledge in English (M=4.56). This might be why the students suggested a supplementary course related to their field (M=4.41) in the last item instead of dropping the courses. The number of students who needed the course to be replaced by another course is also many (M=4.00).

Students were also interviewed to find out if they were satisfied with the English courses they took. Nursing student one said, "The English courses I took at the university before I joined nursing department did not improve my general English knowledge let alone my needs as a nurse". Nursing student 2 added, "The courses I took [Communicative English Skills I and II] helped me to consolidate my language skills I learnt when I was in high school. They did not prepare me to the nursing study". Nursing student 3 strengthened this idea claiming that many of the topics are not specifically relevant to nursing field. She had the following to say "All the activities and topics are about indigenous knowledge, culture and other general issues which are not relevant to the nursing field.

In addition to this, students interviewed claimed that the teaching learning process did not give the chance to develop their speaking and listening skills. Nursing student 4 reported,

Many of the teachers focused on answering comprehension and grammar questions which do not talk about nursing issues. In addition to this, we memorize rules which do not help us when we are in real conversations with colleagues in front of patients. Most of the time, we physicians use English instead of local language [Amharic] to keep the secrets of the patient. At this time we face a problem of words and grammar to express patients' conditions.

When the students were asked if the university should stop giving Communicative English skills, they reported that the courses are necessary to develop their general English skill since the language is an international language. Nursing student one reported "English is an international language. So we need to take these courses". Nursing student six recommended, "The courses we took are important to develop our language skills. However, one of the courses should be replaced by an English course which has direct relation to our field". Student three also commented, "There has to be a specific course which prepares us for our field of study".

Regarding the effectiveness of the English language course content in terms of preparing students for the nursing discipline, the participants considered the content to be inappropriate for nursing profession since topics and activities were irrelevant to their major. Nursing student four asked, "How can I use the language effectively for my nursing profession while all the activities in my English classes focus on general issues that are not relevant to the nursing field." Similarly, nursing student five added, "The English courses do not prepare me for my nursing studies since English courses neglect nursing issues and basic medical terminology." He added that "I heard about medical students in another university who take a course which teaches them medical terminology. Although this is not enough, such attempts are not found in our college".

Students were also unhappy about the activities in the teaching of the current English courses. Nursing student one claimed, "I think English courses should try to develop communication, problem solving and decision making skills". Moreover, nursing student three added "Activities need to be based on authentic settings that can develop our interaction with nurses and doctors in hospitals".

Nursing students' Needs of English language Skills

Part three of the questionnaire asked students to state their needs of English language skills. Table 3 below represents the results of the data gathered.

Table 3. Students' needs of the English Language Skills and Sub-skills

	My English courses at university should focus on	N	Mean	Grand Mean
Reading Skills	Reading medical texts	132	4.89	4.64
	Reading instructions of medical instruments	132	4.65	
	Reading course pamphlets	132	4.33	
	Reading medical notes	132	4.81	
	Reading instructions of drugs	127	4.72	
	Reading medical manuals	132	4.32	
	Reading nursing reports written by a doctor	132	4.71	
Writing Skills	Writing patient history and prescriptions	132	4.89	4.39
	Writing articles/research reports	132	3.29	

	My English courses at university should focus on	N	Mean	Grand Mean
Writing Skills	Writing instructions of medication procedures	129	4.78	
	Writing notes	132	4.83	
	Writing class assignments	132	4.65	
	Writing project	132	3.91	
Listening Skills	Listening to medical lectures	129	4.48	3.73
	Listening to recorded lessons	132	4.14	
	Listening to instructions and explanations of medical instruments	132	3.20	
	Listening to presentations in conferences	132	3.12	
Speaking Skills	asking questions in class	132	4.36	4.18
	Exchanging opinions about a nursing issue in a meeting	132	4.60	
	Giving instructions orally on how to operate a nursing device	132	4.78	
	Giving instructions orally on how to follow medication procedure	132	4.65	
	phone-calling for assistance in emergency situations	132	3.29	
	Communicative functions such as requesting, advising, etc.	128	3.45	

As Table 3 above shows, from the four English language skills students needed to spend more of their time on reading (Grand Mean = 4.64), while they needed to spend less of their time on listening skills (Grand Mean 3.73). Writing (Grand Mean = 4.39) and speaking skills (Grand Mean = 4.18) were given second and third places respectively. Students were also asked to rate their needs of the sub-skills of the four language skills. Among the sub-skills of reading, reading medical texts (M=4.89), reading medical notes (M=4.81), reading instructions of drugs (M=4.72), and reading instructions of medical instruments (M=4.65) are the sub-skills highly needed by students. The data also shows that reading course pamphlets (M=3.33) and reading medical manual (M=3.32) are needed the least by students. When students were asked to rate the importance of the sub-skills of their second most important skill, i.e. writing, they reported that writing patient history and prescriptions (M=4.89), writing notes (M=4.83), writing instructions of medication procedures (M=4.78) and writing class assignments (M=4.65) are highly important for their health profession. On the other hand, they considered, writing articles (M=3.29), and writing project (M=3.91) the least important sub-skills of writing.

Regarding speaking sub-skills, the results showed that the first and second most important sub-skills were giving instructions orally on how to operate a nursing device (M=4.78) and giving instructions orally on how to follow medication procedure (M=4.65) followed by exchanging opinions about a nursing issue in a meeting (M=4.60) and asking questions in class (M=4.36). Students showed the least interest to communicative functions such as requesting, advising (M=3.45) and phone-calling for assistance in emergency situations (M=3.29). Regarding the listening sub-skills, students showed relatively high need to listening to medical lectures (M=4.48) and listening to recorded lessons (M=4.14) while they ignored listening to instructions and explanations of medical instruments (M=3.20) and listening to presentations in conferences (M=3.12).

Students who were interviewed also were asked which skill is the most important one. With some variations almost all the students interviewed commented that all the skills are important for different purposes. Nursing student one said, “Reading and writing are the most important skills because my profession requires a lot of reading and writing. In the same way, I have to be effective in speaking and listening”. Nursing student six added, “In my opinion, I think all the skills are important but reading is the most important, followed by writing and speaking. I need to read a lot of books in my field and speak and write about my patients”

Nursing student 3 said, “All the English skills are very important for the nursing students’ academic studies but they vary in their importance because they need each skill to perform a particular mission”. She added, “Reading is the most necessary skill followed by writing for my medical profession. Speaking and listening are important but not as much as reading and writing because we need to understand texts, medical words and questions in tests and write most of our time”. We seldom speak in English for example in front of patients. We use our mother tongue during speaking most of the time.” Nursing student two strengthened this idea as follows. “Theoretically, all the four skills are very important but reading and writing are practically more important than speaking and listening for nursing students.”

It can be inferred from the interview data that reading skills are the most needed skills for nursing students since they are often required to obtain nursing information from their subject textbooks, teachers’ hand-outs and medical dictionaries, as well as to read the questions in quizzes and examinations. Writing is the second most needed skill. Furthermore, the interview data reveals that although speaking and listening are not as important as reading and writing, they needed them for their profession.

Discussion

This section discusses nursing students’ self-perceived proficiency level in the four language skills, their perceptions of the relevance of English language courses they took before they joined the department and their needs of English language skills.

Regarding their proficiency level in the four English language skills, the grand mean (4.16) shows that the participants thought they are more efficient in reading skills, followed by writing skills which has a grand mean of 4.04. They thought that they are less efficient in listening and speaking since each had a grand mean of less than 4.00. This finding supports the finding of Karimnia & Khodashenas (2019) who reported medical students are less efficient in speaking and listening skills and more efficient in writing and reading.

Students’ responses on the relevance of English language courses they took showed that they are not happy. This is indicated in both the interview and questionnaire data. Students response in the questionnaire showed that the mean of many of the items is less than the average mean (M=3.00). Students reported that the courses are not motivating and needs to be modified so that they meet their need. However, students agreed that the courses developed their general skill/knowledge in English (M=4.56) and suggested a supplementary course related to their field (M=4.41) in the last item. A number of students also recommended that the course should be replaced by another course (M=4.00). Responses from the interview also showed that students are not happy with the content, the tasks and teaching methods of the courses. They reported the English courses are not in line with their needs since they neglected communication, problem solving, decision making skills, nursing issues and basic medical terminology that prepare them for their nursing studies. In addition, they stated that the courses are not related to the students’ studies or career in nursing. This finding is in line with Showail’s (2018) finding who reported that English language

course does not adequately prepare Saudi Arabian nursing students for their nursing education because of the content, teaching methods, and failure to assess students' needs. The result also supports the findings of K yrkg z (2009), Fadel and Rajab (2017), and Coskun (2013), who reported that the content of English courses taught before they join their major departments are not effective to prepare them for subsequent study. But the finding does not support the findings of Kuzembayeva & Zhakanova (2021) who claimed English language courses help to develop the linguistic ability of medical students to deal with the scientific and technical contents of their field. It is also against Sa-fiyeh (2021) who claimed that 50% of the participants are happy with the English courses they took and requested for a minor modification.

Nursing students were also asked about their needs of the English language skills. Data from the questionnaire showed that while they needed to spend less of their time on listening skills, they needed to spend more of their time on reading (Grand Mean = 4.64). Writing (Grand Mean = 4.39) was found to be the second most needed skill and speaking skills (overall mean = 4.18) was given a third place. This finding is parallel with those of previous needs analyses in medical contexts (e.g. TAŐCI, 2007) who clearly reported that reading is the most frequently needed and the most important skill for the students. However, the students in this study ranked writing skills as the second most important skill to improve while students in TAŐCI's (2007) study considered speaking skills as the second most needed skills.

Conclusion

The study investigated nursing students' perceptions of English courses they took at the university and their English language needs and wants from their perspectives. The study highlighted that students needs and wants have to be systematically analyzed before designing and delivering English courses to the students. This is particularly true when we consider the findings of this study. As discussed in the above sections many of the participants are not happy with the courses they took since the contents and the teaching styles are not parallel with their field. It was also found out that the courses are not motivating since they are similar with the courses they took before joining university. But it is important to note that the students are positive about the courses they took since they developed their general English skills and suggested another course which meets their nursing field.

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